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BEHIND THE SCENES OF SYPHON FILTER
THE PLAYSTATION CLASSIC DISSECTED

exclusive access

GOD OF WAR

WE GET THE BRUTAL TRUTH ABOUT KRATOS' TRIUMPHANT RETURN

HIGHLIGHTS

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II ■ DEAD STATIC DRIVE ■ KINGDOM HEARTS III
INSURGENCY: SANDSTORM ■ THE SURGE 2 ■ GREEDFALL ■ CALL OF CTHULHU
A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE ■ BIOMUTANT ■ H1Z1: AUTO ROYALE ■ METAL GEAR SURVIVE
KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE ■ CELESTE ■ WHERE THE WATER TASTES LIKE WINE



ISSUE 198



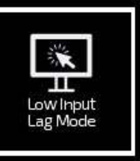
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Stick or twist. It's the dilemma of every long-running game franchise. Most stick, feeling with good reason that if it isn't broken then it shouldn't need fixing. But I think we know that this mindset can ultimately lead to diminishing returns. A great idea may be able fuel a project for a long time, launching it forward with tremendous speed, but eventually inertia, gravity or just a lack of energy will take hold. Games like Assassin's Creed, Gears Of War and Call Of Duty have experienced this to greater or lesser extents, some finally making changes to reinvigorate their releases (and to great success).

And so we come to *God Of War* and how massively Sony Santa Monica is changing up the formula around Kratos, the gameplay, the camera, the setting and the tone. So much of what we might have considered iconic about God Of War is being thrown away, but importantly not without forethought and planning. There's a considered form of deconstruction happening with this release that makes it very exciting to me.

The cheap dig against it is probably that it's attempting to ape *The Last Of Us* with its adult and child dynamic, but thinking about where Kratos has been, what he's been through and what I would want from him moving forward, seeing him in this unfamiliar relationship, having to care for someone other than just himself sounds very intriguing to me. And that's why I'm delighted we had the chance to speak with creative director Cory Barlog, and go hands on with the game to see how this ambitious plan is coming together.

And I'd really like to take this opportunity to encourage you to check out our subs offer this issue on page 42. As always, it's the cheapest and most convenient way to make sure you get every issue of **games™**. It also means you get to read features like this issue's *God Of War* exclusive before anyone else.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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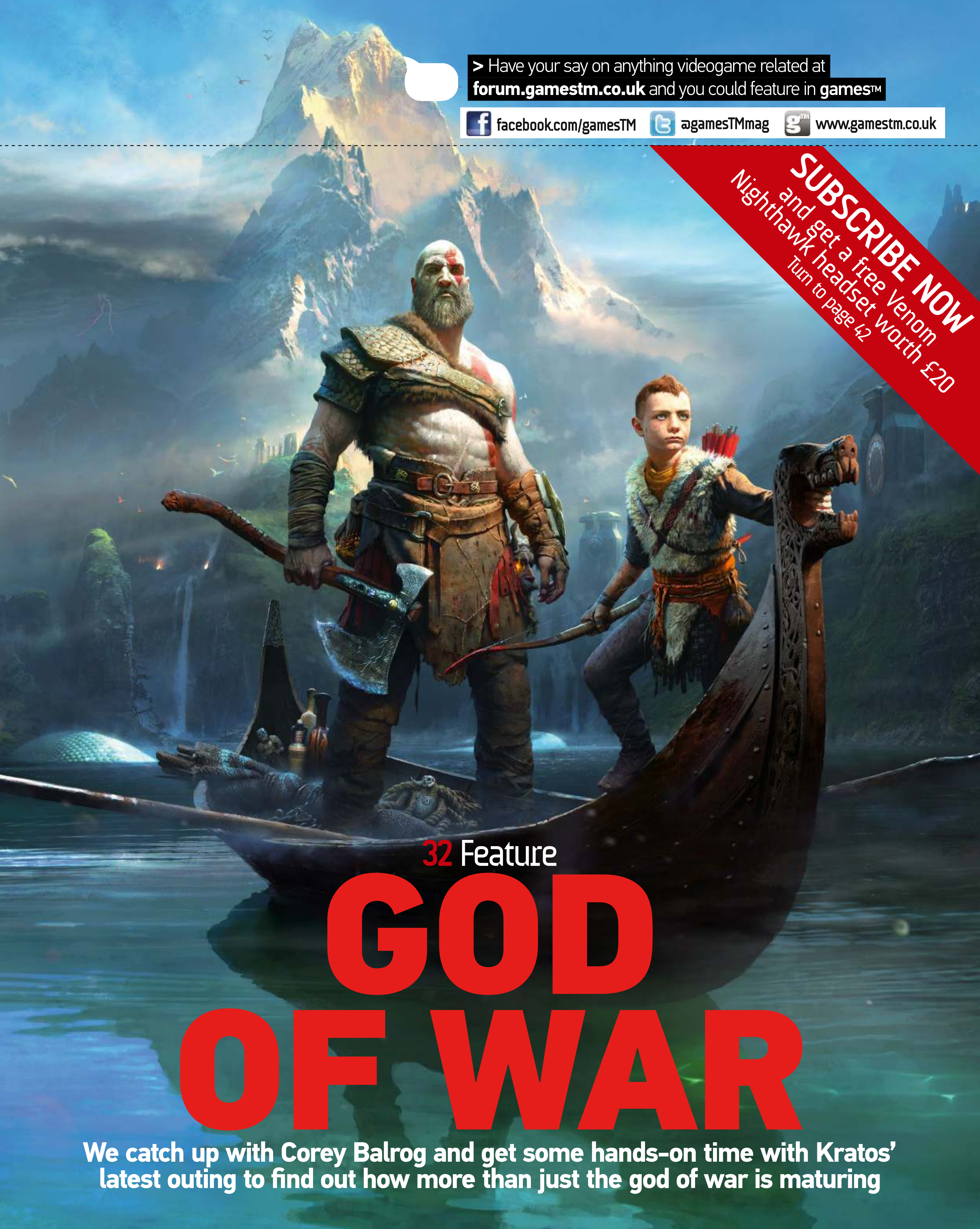
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GOD OF WAR

We catch up with Corey Balrog and get some hands-on time with Kratos' latest outing to find out how more than just the god of war is maturing

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II: A CONVERSATION WITH OURSELVES

→ ROCKSTAR REMAINS TIGHT-LIPPED ON THE PROSPECTS FOR ITS NEXT WESTERN OPUS, SO WE ATTEMPT A SOCRATIC DISSECTION

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **26 OCTOBER 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

So, *RDR2* got delayed again then?
Indeed. Although we now have a far more specific release date to look forward to than the relatively vague autumn 2017 or spring 2018 dates we've been staring at for the last few months. Late October seems like a pretty locked-in date to us.

No more delays then?
We would doubt it unless there's something terribly wrong with what Rockstar is attempting to put together. It seems as if Rockstar just really wants to get to grips with the current generation of consoles to deliver the very best game it can. Remember that *GTA V* on Xbox One and PS4 was really just a port with some mild upgrades. This is something else.

Didn't *GTA V* go through a bunch of delays too?
It did actually and it even launched without GTA Online being fully operational, adding that in later as an update. All things considered, given how massive GTA Online has proven to be, that is pretty remarkable.

Sounds like we *RDR2* launching without its online could be a possibility then.
Hmm. We're not so sure about that. *GTA V* launched at a time when all we really cared about from a Grand Theft Auto was its single-player experience and a few online distractions. But in the post GTA Online world we think we're all equally excited to see what a similar approach would bring to the western frontier. So, no, we think it will be looking to launch with its online functionality ready to go.

We've been hearing rumours about the online. What about that?
Yep, we've heard them too, but right now we have nothing confirmed, so we will just have to carry on assuming that *RDR2* will feature some big online functionality, hopefully something close to GTA Online. The reason we're so confident this will be the case is simply that Rockstar struck gold with the functionality on *GTA V* and it would seem foolish not to mine that seam again.

Fair enough, so what do we know that's new?
Really only what we can glean from screens and playing through the released trailers a dozen times. We know we'll be playing as Arthur Morgan through the campaign, an enforcer for Dutch and his gang and that it's at least largely set before the events of *Red Dead Redemption*.

Largely set?
We only hesitate to say entirely set because the last game did a little time hopping and we wouldn't like to assume this one won't do the same at some point. But it may not. We simply don't know.

IN BRIEF
We return to the tale of Dutch van der Linde's gang, this time a little earlier in their history when they were in their prime as terrorisers of America's heartland

Where does the redemption come into things?
We're not sure. Morgan certainly appears to be a particularly irredeemable person from what we've seen so far. Dutch seems a little concerned though in the last trailer, possibly about the gang falling apart. And teaming up with others appears to be a bigger concern of this game than the largely solo adventures of John Marston.

How so?
Well, we've seen characters leaping onto trains, multiple riders escorting stagecoaches over the prairie, a posse gathering on a hill and charging towards a target. This all feels like it wants you to be in the midst of a full western gang experience, which could be a lot of fun.

Could there be character swapping like *GTA V*?
That we're not so sure about. That was a pretty unique mechanic for *Grand Theft Auto V* and Rockstar has typically preferred to keep some delineation between its franchises. There may well be some squad mechanics, though, that are unique to this game.

Anything else we should be paying attention to?
Only these fantastic new screens Rockstar has been putting out. Specific details about the game may be thin on the ground, but these visuals do speak for themselves rather clearly. The lighting, atmospheric changes, dust, smoke and more all look fantastic.

Any other details to look for?
Of course. Check out the way the snow is kicking up under the horses in some scenes. That's some really nice work there, as it seems to kick up in dust and in chunks. And some of the destructibility seems insanely good.

Will that be in gameplay though?
We would think so. The splintering of wood from explosions and gunfire in some of these images may seem like something out of a cutscene, but we suspect it will all be in-engine. Some have said it could be the best-looking open-world game ever made and on this evidence, we'd be hard pressed to argue.







DISSECTING A SCREEN

→ What do Rockstar's images say that the developer isn't?

DESTRUCTION

■ The first thing to point out is all this debris that's flying around. That's an incredible amount of destructibility to be handling in a gunfight, as wood appears to be splintering from every direction. That's very exciting.

DUAL WIELD

■ We've known that dual-wielding pistols were going to be a thing in *Red Dead Redemption II* for a while now and this image confirms that fact for us once again. It's good to see that this simple but popular mechanic, also a great western trope, will be available.

COSTUME CHANGE

■ Morgan appears to have a pretty stable look of beige duster and blue shirt in the game, but we've seen a few variations of that shirt and several images of him without the coat, so some form of outfit-swapping system seems likely.

GRIME

■ Lots to look out for in the clothing as several images appear to show some really nice attention to detail in how dirt and wear make the clothes look. It's not clear how much of this is going to be procedural or just how the clothes were designed, but it gives them a lot of character.

MURDER AND MAYHEM

■ Perhaps the other thing to draw from all this destruction is just how chaotic and brutal life as Arthur Morgan will prove to be. Marston was no saint, but playing as Morgan with the full force of the van der Linde gang behind you could lead down some nasty roads.

IN BRIEF
This legendary *Half-Life 2* mod gears up for its next battle in *Insurgency: Sandstorm*

SHIFT IN FOCUS

When we caught up with New World Interactive this time last year, the team excitedly revealed that the eagerly anticipated sequel to 2014's *Insurgency* would include a story campaign – a first for the series that first began life as a *Half-Life 2* mod in 2007. That, we're now told, will no longer launch alongside *Insurgency: Sandstorm*, if it does at all.

"As a team we have decided to make some shifts in the direction of *Insurgency: Sandstorm*," says lead game designer Michael Tsarouhas. "To start, the single player and cooperative story has been cancelled for release, and will be considered again at a later date. This is due to its high production requirements and our commitment to deliver to our fans in 2018. The story was a very exciting and new opportunity for us as a team, but we felt we had to make a choice."

"At this moment it's more important to us that we deliver a full multiplayer and co-op experience that improves on *Insurgency*, one that is true to our style and what we feel we do best. We know to some of you this decision may be unexpected, and we're sad to share this news, but this was a shift our team felt we needed to make."

While we were impressed by what we had seen and heard of the ambitious campaign – in which you play as a woman who is enslaved by radical insurgents in Iraq, supporting up to four-player co-op and featuring incredible audio/visual design – we are ultimately happy to see the studio put its full attention back into the core multiplayer experience.





DEATH WAITS FOR NO ONE IN INSURGENCY: SANDSTORM

→ HANDS-ON WITH 2018'S MOST INTENSE MILITARY SHOOTER

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE** | DEVELOPER: **NEW WORLD INTERACTIVE** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1-16**

In many respects, *Insurgency: Sandstorm* feels like the direct antithesis of the Battlefield multiplayer experience. For one of these titles, the oft-shouted phrase "Play The Objective" has become something of a running joke in the community – with players largely accepting that the vast majority would rather engage in a thinly veiled Team Deathmatch variant over working together in any obvious fashion. For the other, it's a creed that runs to the very core of the game's theme and composition – where doing anything *but* playing the objective is the fastest route to failure and frustration.

Insurgency: Sandstorm is a challenging military shooter inspired by the glory days of the genre. It pushes players to remember the majesty and difficulty that could so often be found intertwined in the earliest Ghost Recon and Operation Flashpoint games, updating it for the modern era in an Unreal Engine 4 extravaganza that's as punishing to play as it is beautiful to behold.

Developer New World Interactive, then, has taken that formula and expanded it. *Insurgency: Sandstorm* shines in its co-operative modes, an excellent showcase of how objective-based gameplay can indeed be directly reinforced through mechanics and systems. High lethality keeps players in constant communication, pushing forward towards capture points through the modern warfare-inspired locales as a single unit. The distinct lack of weapon spread and crosshairs ensures that shots need to be placed delicately – the bullet goes where the barrel of the weapon is pointed – while limited ammunition and no discernible HUD will quickly push you to make sure that every time that trigger is pulled, it will have to count for something.

Insurgency: Sandstorm is particularly interesting as it's different to the shooters you'll currently find – particularly on console. While it's a far cry from your arcade FPS games, the likes of *Overwatch* and Counter-Strike, it isn't quite a simulation shooter either, veering away from the impenetrable systems of *Escape From Tarkov*, *SWAT 4*, and *ARMA III*. Instead, *Insurgency* falls somewhere in-between the two popular sub-genres, existing as an alternative for those looking to come away from a challenge without a bloodied nose.

We went hands-on with Checkpoint, a co-operative mode that saw us teaming up with six other members of the industry in an effort to take back enemy-controlled locations on the TOWN map (which some of you may be familiar with from *Insurgency*'s time as a Counter-Strike mod back in the day) to, eventually, destroy important ordinance with an IED. One or two hits and you're down; with no medic class to speak of and no direct respawn system, it forces you to be wary of your movement and tracking – with players only returning to the field should you hold down a checkpointed area or successfully defend one from assault by the smart enemy AI.

Pushing slowly over a bridge, across an open space, or through claustrophobic backstreets is a consistently tense affair – death can (and often does) manifest itself from all sides. Hearing the pepper of gunfire across cover – the shriek of team-mates being flanked – never failed to get the blood pumping, with the squeeze of the trigger feeling as powerful as it did delicate.

Insurgency: Sandstorm is an intense experience that barely let up during our time with it. Air support and vehicles are limited, and so the emphasis is placed on doing the best with what you've got – you'll have an opportunity to tinker with your loadout after you die, though attachments and ammunition variations will only make so much of a difference here. The biggest change to get your head around is the lack of any distinct weapon meta, the learning curve extending little further than managing the recoil and figuring out the curvature of your bullet trajectory. This is a game where teamwork is essential, where the difference between success and failure is decided in a second.

Insurgency: Sandstorm is a promising FPS in its starring co-operative mode, but how its tight play translates not only to console but also to the larger-scale 16-verus-16 objective-based skirmishes being teased will likely define its longevity in the market. For now, however, you'll want to keep your eye on any chances to get into the Alpha or Beta (we're told they are "coming soon"). It's seriously worth trying this one out for yourself.



Above: The studio is eager to show off the console port of *Insurgency: Sandstorm*. It's confident that it has a handle on converting its high lethality combat and realistic gun control to the game pad, though we are yet to experience it for ourselves.







GTA MEETS LOVECRAFT IN DEAD STATIC DRIVE

→ DESIGNER **MIKE BLACKNEY** TAKES US BEHIND THE SCENES OF HIS AWESOME-LOOKING COSMIC HORROR ROAD TRIP

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **KURTRUSSELLFANCLUB** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **1**

Some videogames immediately arrest the attention and threaten to never let you loose again. We first caught a glimpse of *Dead Static Drive* a number of years ago after creator Mike Blackney took to sharing gifs of the game in action on Twitter, and have been following its evolving development intently ever since. It's got this hyper-slick animation and gorgeous visual style that make it difficult to turn away from, with a premise that sounds as ridiculous as it does intriguing. *Dead Static Drive* presents an existential road trip adventure game through small-town America; it's you and your whip against the world, left to survive as otherworldly creatures claw their way out of the maw of hell intent on bringing you down to their level as you venture across a progressively hostile and oppressive world. We sat down with Blackney between development milestones to discuss the indie hit in the making.

IN BRIEF
A road trip through a decidedly gothic America, a race against time as you're assaulted by evil forces

What's the deal with *Dead Static Drive*?
Okay, so the short pitch is: Grand Theft Cthulhu. If that works, I can usually explain it with a longer pitch, and that's where I'll say it's an existential horror road trip through a world of nightmarish creatures and Americana: gas stops, cheap motels and old cars.

What's the appeal of horror offerings across locations that are relatively mundane? You know, aside from all of the creatures clawing their way out of the ground.
What a great question. I think games can be really great at 'what-if' scenarios: what if I crawled down a manhole and there was a subterranean world there? What if I was a space marine with a chainsaw gun? What if a horse just started chatting to me?

Well, maybe it's a sign that I'm not super creative, but the kinds of 'what-if' fantasies that I usually make up are the ones where it's our world but with something frightening that I could just stumble upon. So when I want to make games, for me it's getting to have a place to tell those stories, a way to get them all out of my head – but also a place where I can be a player and act them out as well. What if the rest stop I pulled over in had a dark past? What if I realised that a car had been following me for hours? What if I was driving a really awesome car?

What was the inspiration behind the super-gorgeous art style?
Poster art, really. Before *Dead Static Drive* I was working on a space-exploration prototype with an art style inspired by Roger Dean and Dan McPharlin. I didn't love the mechanics or the setting, but some of the art style really felt great to me. It's not the most important part of the style, but one part that I fell in love with was the shadows. Often in my references I'd see shadows that were these enveloping, solid blocks of colour – sometimes black, but also blue and red and teal. It gave a really brooding and oppressive feeling.

After I ditched that project I was playing around with the idea of a survival/horror GTA-themed game. I wanted an easy style that also contributed to the horror feeling and looked completely different from what I was seeing a lot of. But it was really important that it was easy, so I wouldn't get bogged down too much in asset creation. I've worked as a tech artist before so my natural decision was to rewrite how lighting worked in the game so I would be able to make really basic, ugly art and the game engine would magically make it look consistent and nice.

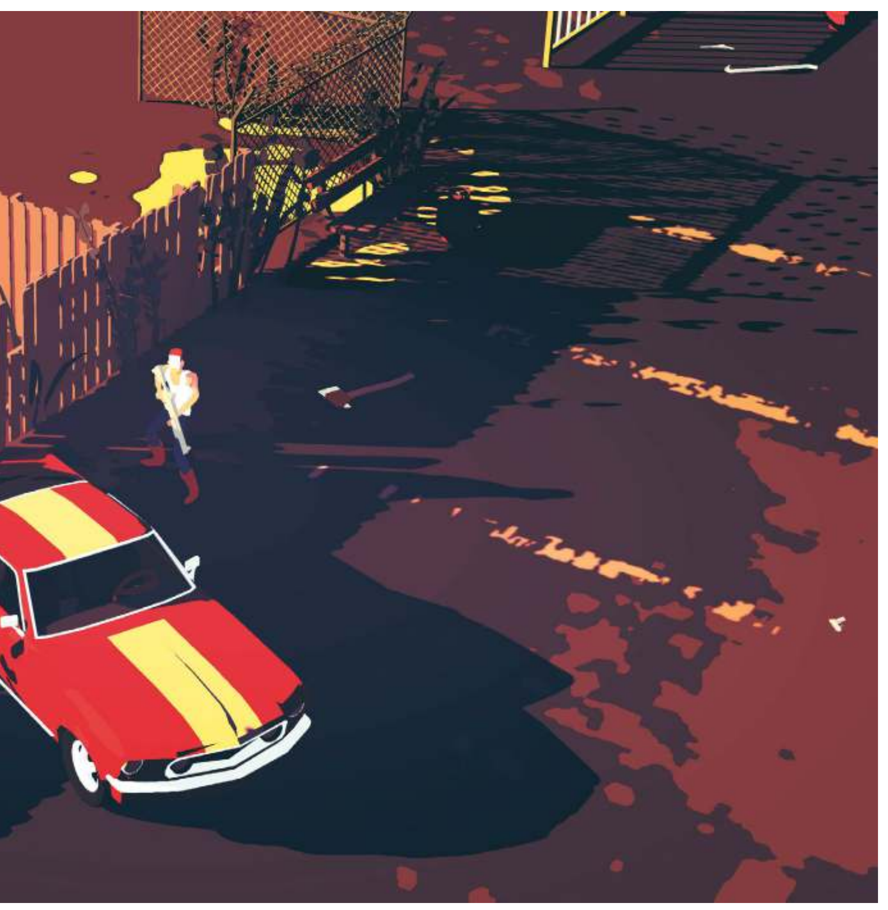
How have you found development of *Dead Static Drive*?
I started the project in late 2014, if you can believe it. I spent quite a bit of that time working as a teacher, and I left that career to go full-time indie about six months ago. Thankfully it hasn't really been more challenging than anticipated, because I didn't have any expectations that the project would get much attention or that I'd need to be done by a given date.

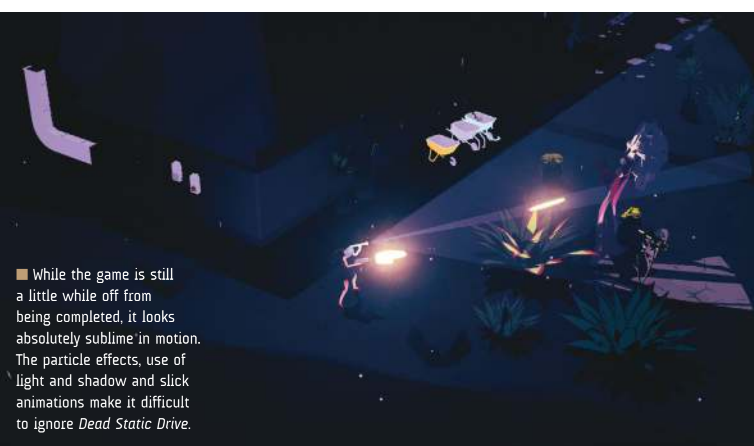
That means that I've been able to go at my own pace, and keep iterating and improving based on feedback. The response I've gotten has been incredible, and now that I'm on the project full time I feel like it's progressing about a thousand times faster! Unfortunately I still can't confidently plot the release, but hopefully that can change soon. Right now I'm focusing on making sure I have the best foundation for finishing the game, but there's quite a lot of work left to do. It's an old cliché, but I'm not in a hurry to release a bad game.

■ *Dead Static Drive* is described by creator Mike Blackney as Grand Theft Cthulhu, an adventure game in which you road trip through small-town America and attempt to survive against an emerging threat – Lovecraftian style.









■ While the game is still a little while off from being completed, it looks absolutely sublime in motion. The particle effects, use of light and shadow and slick animations make it difficult to ignore *Dead Static Drive*.





EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE SURGE 2

→ GET UP TO DATE ON DECK13 AND FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE'S SCI-FI SOULS-LIKE SEQUEL

Wait, what is *The Surge* again?
The Surge is developer Deck13's action-RPG that released in May of 2017. It's heavily inspired by Dark Souls, taking the uncompromising action into a science-fiction world filled with futuristic exoskeleton suits, robotic enemies and supercharged human combatants to decapitate in a number of gloriously gruesome ways.

What's the sequel doing then?
Deck13 is doubling down on the elements fans gravitated to in the original while simultaneously expanding the scope of its ambition. Combat is going to be more brutal and tactical than before, upgraded to give you a chance against an array of diverse and punishing new enemies and bosses.

So it'll still be super gory then?
It absolutely will be. *The Surge 2* is overhauling its dynamic limb-targeting system, which lets players focus in on specific body parts to deal maximum damage against foes, while a suite of all new exoskeleton suits, weapons, abilities, implants and drones will help showcase the more fully formed character progression and customisation systems.

Do we know where it is set?
An all-new environment is on the cards, with Deck13 eager to let us suffer in someplace entirely unfamiliar. The studio is reportedly pushing the FLEDGE engine with this one, introducing more ambitious and complex level design as it tackles a sprawling and devastated city as the backdrop to *The Surge 2*'s chaos.

Okay, so when is it coming out?
While the studio hasn't set an official date, it has confirmed that it is shooting for a loose 2019 window of release on PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

10 THINGS WORTH KNOWING ABOUT GREEDFALL

→ A BEHIND THE SCENES LOOK AT AN INTRIGUING FANTASY RPG

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE** | DEVELOPER: **SPIDERS** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**



IT'S AN ACTION RPG

1 *GreedFall* is an action-RPG set in the 17th Century across a fictional fantasy continent, a newly colonised land full of mystery, magic and monsters. A new land brings about fresh dangers for the settlers, with much of *GreedFall* focused around the rising tensions between the arriving humans and the native elves who once were the sole inhabitants of the land.

IT LOOKS GORGEOUS

2 We were recently treated to a behind closed doors demonstration of *GreedFall* in action and were impressed by what we saw. Visually, the game looks stunning; *GreedFall*'s visual style is heavily inspired by Baroque artwork from 17th Century Europe – meaning you should expect sprawling landscapes made up of muted warm colours, dark undertones and beautiful vistas.

YOU CAN KARMA IF YOU WANT TO

3 It appears that your karma standing in the game will change as a result of your actions and how you interact with characters that you meet. This, in turn, will change the NPCs and how any potential companions will behave towards you. That said, there also appears to be a neutral play option, which means you can dismiss the whole concept of karma from the game if you would prefer.

IT ISN'T OPEN WORLD

4 *GreedFall* isn't following other popular action-RPGs and casting its adventure out across one vast interconnected space. Instead, it will feature 16 large and distinctive maps, each offering a different flavour and tone from one another. Some of these areas will be wildernesses inhabited by strange and powerful beasts, while others will be controlled by a variety of warring factions.

THE MAPS WILL CHANGE

5 Developer Spiders has promised that a dynamic day and night cycle is being worked on that it hopes will help bring a stronger sense of authenticity to its world. This cycle will have a big impact on the game, altering everything from the density of enemies and the types of quests you can pick up from NPCs, to the types of creatures that you'll encounter while exploring.

IN BRIEF

GreedFall is the latest RPG from Spiders, the studio behind *The Technomancer* and *Bound By Flame*







IT HAS DEEP CUSTOMISATION

6 At the core of *GreedFall* is a system of deep character interaction and progression, which all starts with how you choose to create the leading character. We're told that you'll be able to pick the gender of the protagonist at the beginning of the game, then customise their attributes, before decking them out in new clothes and weapons throughout the course of the story.

THERE IS CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE

7 Opportunity is at *GreedFall*'s heart. Spiders wants to offer considerable freedom in its quest system, giving you the chance to approach completion through combat, diplomacy and deception. The latter tactics are funnelled through a conversation system, meaning you can dictate beats of the story, not to mention the five companions who you can build (or break) relationships with.

THE COMBAT IS FAMILIAR

8 The combat system will be familiar to any Witcher and Assassin's Creed fans. While there are 14 different weapon classes to choose between (standard fantasy fare, such as swords and axes), it all looks very familiar. That isn't to say anything's wrong with it, but combat looks fairly unrefined at this stage. It lacks its own identity, though that is, admittedly, a common problem for games of this genre.

IT HAS CLEAR INSPIRATIONS

9 While Spiders wouldn't be drawn on its influences, there are two clear games that sprung to mind during our demo. While it's difficult to place entirely, *GreedFall* either looks like a po-faced Fable game or *Witcher II* built on a smaller budget. We'll need to see more of the conversation and companion systems in action to see if it ultimately diverges from such comparisons.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE LEAD CHARACTER

10 While we walked away fairly impressed with the writing and world-building on display, it's clear that Spiders needs to make a serious appraisal of the leading player character. The protagonist is, for want of a better word, drab. Quickly fading into the background of almost every scene – passive and inconsequential. This will *have* to change before *GreedFall* launches.

IN BRIEF

The studio behind *Mordheim: City Of The Damned* takes on this classic Warhammer 40K tabletop game in an impressive fashion

NECROMUNDA: UNDERHIVE WARS IS A MUST PLAY FOR FANS OF THE TABLETOP GAME

→ THE ESSENCE OF JUDGE DREDD MEETS WARHAMMER 40K IN THIS TURN-BASED TACTICAL RPG

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE** | DEVELOPER: **ROGUE FACTOR** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **TBC**





INTO THE UNDERHIVE

1 Warhammer 40K fans were delighted to see the return of Necromunda last year, the popular tabletop game as excellent today in its revival as it was back in 1995 with its debut. Still, we approached this videogame conversion with trepidation – could Rogue Factor really capture the spirit and chaos of Necromunda's unique setup, punk attitude and compelling systems? Turns out we were worried about nothing, as our first look at the game in action has left us feeling incredibly positive over the direction the studio is taking.

DYNAMIC PRESENTATION

2 *Necromunda: Underhive Wars* is relatively unique in that it is blending real-time strategy with turn-based tactical combat. You have the opportunity to control just one of your four gang members at a time, using Action Points to complete actions such as movement and reloading weapons, with the game transitioning to turn-based once line-of-sight is established with your opponent. It gives the game a sense of fluidity, capturing the escalation and back and forth that the tabletop game handles so excellently.

GORGEOUS ENVIRONMENTS

3 Necromunda is set in the filthy Underhive, a maw of death and destruction cast out across a hellish and lawless warren of derelict sewers, abandoned tunnels and poisoned structures. It's awesome. Impressively, Rogue Factor has really delivered here. The verticality and space afforded to the player in the one area we've seen was expansive and atmospheric, offering a plethora of combat and movement opportunities for players looking to set ambushes and traps.

DEEP CUSTOMISATION

4 Customisation and personalisation is at the heart of the Warhammer experience. Thankfully, *Necromunda: Underhive Wars* looks to be delivering in this respect. Gang members need to be recruited and renamed first, but once in the fold you'll see their skills, traits and attributes develop and evolve – so long as they can make it from battle to battle without dying, as it's permanent. The studio has also promised a huge array of visual modifications to be made to gear, weapons and appearance.



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There are a number of different vehicles to pick from, but the Humvee appears to be the most popular to use at the moment. And they can be customised with paint jobs if you want to stand out from the crowd (a risky move in battle royale, we would suggest).

H1Z1 AUTO ROYALE EMBRACES THE MADNESS

→ FOUR WHEELS, NO RULES, NON-STOP ACTION AND INSANITY

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **DAYBREAK GAMES** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **4-120**

The history of the battle royale genre, its path from *DayZ* game mod to multi-million selling behemoth, takes a route straight through *H1Z1* and *Auto Royale* is Daybreak Games' response to the increased competition it now faces in the market. As responses go we would call this one loud, clear and perhaps just a tad insane.

Auto Royale feels like a mode built by a development team that was paying close attention to console players of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* when it originally launched on Xbox One. Many players of the most recent incarnation of *PUBG* were making use of cars, buggies and bikes as a means of avoiding confrontations with other players and giving themselves added protection. This was something that PUBG Corporation patched to try to tone down, but the action it inspired was very compelling. *H1Z1*'s response is to double down on the concept and ramp up the action even further.

IN BRIEF
One of the original battle royale testbeds looks to bring back some of its player base with a crowd-pleasing new beta

Looking like something out of GTA Online's race creator mode only on a much larger scale, *Auto Royale* pits up to 30 teams of four players against each other in vehicular warfare. You decide before the game begins whether you would rather drive or shoot and as things begin you'll already be in your car. You can't get out of the vehicle and you can't switch positions. The floating pick-ups and upgrades need to be collected by driving through them, similar to driving games like the battle racing in GTA, and there are ramps scattered all over the map, also reminiscent of Rockstar's online offering.

In terms of objective and mechanics, it really couldn't be any simpler. The aim remains to be the last team standing, or rather the last team sitting in their respective seats inside the vehicle while the charred remains of the other teams smoulder on the tarmac. To do this you must shoot the life out of them, damaging their car to the point that it explodes. Your own team can

Right: The flames blasting from the back of the Humvees should be an indication of the tone and intent of *Auto Royale*. This evolution of *H1Z1*'s battle royale mode is about high-octane action that could rival scenes from a *Fast & Furious* movie.



Ramps are positioned all around the map, often offering pick-ups on the way. Some are smartly positioned in villages and will help you escape urbanised areas a little faster, while others are simply out in the world and could be a little risky to use as they can slow your progress.

KING OF THE KILL

→ H1Z1 and its place in battle royale gaming




For those of you not familiar with the timeline and title-hopping history of battle royale as a genre in recent years, *H1Z1* has a pivotal role to play. Brendan Greene, AKA PlayerUnknown, is credited with the first breakout version of the experience with a mod for *DayZ* by way of *Arma 2*. The mod caught the attention of the development team at Daybreak, then working on *H1Z1* as a zombie survival experience, not dissimilar from the base *DayZ* game. It offered to license the mode concept from Greene and what was born was a split in the *H1Z1* identity, spawning *H1Z1: Just Survive* (the original concept) and *H1Z1: King Of The Kill* (the battle royale mode). It was after this that Brendan Greene was approached by Bluehole to make a battle royale game from the ground up and in the meantime the concept has been gathering more and more admirers in development circles. It will be interesting to see who jumps on the bandwagon next and what it will mean for these trend-setting titles.

Unicorn masks are typically a good signal in terms of where a game is coming from. For instance, you're unlikely to find a unicorn mask in a game about dark and evil terrors emerging from someone's subconscious, but you are likely to find them in bombastic action games where murder and mayhem have little consequence.



mitigate the impact of other teams shooting them by driving over repair pick-ups, finding weapon upgrades for the squad and so on. It's really no different from playing any other battle royale format of game just with resources being a lot easier to spot and camping not really being a sensible playstyle.

Which brings us to what makes *Auto Royale* particularly exciting in its early stages. It's chaotically action-packed for a battle royale game. Compared to the vehicle use early on in *PUBG* on Xbox One, where staying in a vehicle was a defensive move, *Auto Royale* is all-out offense. The map is large, but with 30 teams driving around in Humvees, that space feels very small even before the toxic gas begins the close in. What's more, the intervals between the gas closing in are pretty short, forcing players into close proximity very quickly. Airdrops offer some very enticing rewards, which again makes for a high likelihood of confrontation. But, then, when you know you can peel away in a moment to find safety, the risk and reward of those moments becomes something of an interesting calculation.

"MATCHES WE'VE SEEN HAVE A TENDENCY TO GET TO THE FINAL SAFE ZONE WITH AT LEAST TEN TEAMS STILL IN THE MIX"

Energy bars above the vehicles as you take them on make judging progress against your competitors very easy, although being lured into a false sense of security by their health when they could have laid down mines, oil slicks or be carrying explosive arrows, is something to be wary about. As it is, with health readily available, matches we've seen have a tendency to get to the final safe zone with at least ten teams still in the mix, which means absolute carnage in the final moments.

As a response to *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* and *Fortnite* continuing to draw in new players and with the reports that *H1Z1* had lost 91 percent of its players, based on its peak in July 2017, this feels like a bold, ambitious and smart play. That the release of this beta coincided with *H1Z1* finally coming out of Early Access and costing only £14.99 to download is both a nice piece of timing to get this title back on our radar and undercut the cost of some of the competition out there. *H1Z1* is back in the fight and this feels like the shot in the arm we've been waiting to see for the battle royale format.

IN BRIEF

Sora, Donald and Goofy continue their journey through the many realms of Disney, meeting new friends and old enemies along the way



MOBILE CONNECTION

→ **Might be worth downloading *Union X***

Kingdom Hearts series director Tetsuya Nomura confirmed that *Kingdom Hearts Union X*, the mobile game available on iOS and Android, would link to *Kingdom Hearts III* in some fashion. The exact details of what that might entail are unclear, although it would seem the team itself is still playing around with some concepts. On the most basic level there seems to be a possibility that playing the mobile game might unlock something within the console game. This also means that *Union X* will be getting even more attention from its development team in the coming months with new content promised, so now may be a good time to jump in and check it out if you haven't already.





WHY WE MARVEL AT THE AMBITION OF KINGDOM HEARTS III

→ SQUARE ENIX'S LATEST RPG IS OFFERING MORE MECHANICS AND MORE FAN SERVICE THAN WE CAN KEEP UP WITH

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX** | DEVELOPER: **SQUARE ENIX BUSINESS DIVISION 3** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**



We're likely looking at a 12-year gap between the launch of *Kingdom Hearts II* and *Kingdom Hearts III*, but the development team seems to have gone to extra lengths to make sure that the wait seems justified. This isn't a simple expansion on old ideas or a slightly prettier re-skin of the series. Tetsuya Nomura and his development team have set their sights higher than that, and we're more and more impressed with the results every time we see it again.

At its core, *KH3* remains a game all about fan service, almost above all other things, and in this respect it fully embraces the world of Disney in ways that would be unimaginable before. Each world appears to be its own beast, with Sora, Donald Duck and Goofy adapting their look and playstyle to blend into their surroundings to even greater degrees than we've seen previously. But it goes beyond simply looks, with Sora taking on a monster persona in Monsters Inc. or becoming a toy in Toy Story. Even his combat abilities appear to be unique to each world and level up as you build your combos and attacks.

The newly revealed Monsters Inc. stage is a good example of this as Sora's keyblade takes on a new, more industrial look in the factory, turning into mechanical grabbing arms after a while and then finally (although perhaps not finally, but this is all we've seen in action so far) into two yo-yos that can be swung around and become huge spinning blades or crushing weights, depending on the attack. By extension, each of these weapon states has its own unique moves and combos attached to them, creating a lot of variety in the real-time action experience.

> "AT ITS CORE, KH3 REMAINS A GAME ALL ABOUT FAN SERVICE, ALMOST ABOVE ALL OTHER THINGS"

Small touches from the previous games carry over too, such as the command menu changing its style to match the world you're currently exploring. There are also more significant elements though, such as the appearance of a Laughter Power meter in the Monsters Inc. stage that seems to react to the laughter of Boo, the young girl from the movie. What that might unleash once it's full we're not sure, but it suggests even more location-specific gameplay will be available.

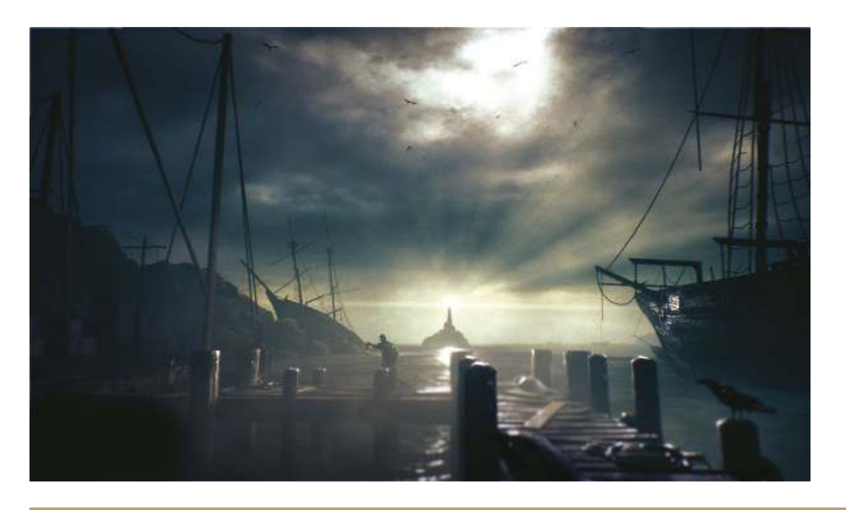
Speaking of travel, the Gummi Ship makes a return as your means of transport between Disney worlds, but with improved functionality to be enjoyed here too. There will be two distinct modes to using it, with an exploration phase allowing for full 360-degree flight and much larger areas to fly around than have been in the series to date, and a battle phase that takes you into full dogfight mode with a lot more enemies to face than has previously been the case. Given the scale of some of the combat we've already seen on the ground, the promise of Gummi Ship combat sounds very enticing indeed.

Which brings us back to the moment-to-moment play that will ultimately be the mainstay of the experience and the impressive scale on which it will all be taking place. The addition of two extra squad members alone means that in each world you'll be picking up characters to join the fray and command along with Goofy and Donald, but the power of the Unreal Engine, which wasn't even the engine originally intended for this sequel some years back, is really being brought to bear. Not only are there more characters on screen than ever, but the particle effects from combat and the way in which enemies react and interact with Sora has been vastly improved. And the way in which bosses and world traversal have been combined are mightily impressive, bringing to mind some of the fluidity and scale of a game like *Sunset Overdrive* more than classic Kingdom Hearts. The Toy Story boss in particular is insane in its execution, with floating platforms and objects flying all over the place. We've been tempering our expectation for a while having waited so long for this sequel, but we're really starting to be won over by this new adventure and its impressive new features.

■ Left: Ariel has been revealed as an assist character, appearing here in a Tangled stage. This has been taken to mean that an underwater stage may not be likely, but you never know. Perhaps more exciting is the potential for summon characters with some pretty spectacular abilities. Below: The Rocket Ruckus gameplay from the Toy Story stage has us particularly interested. The floor is made from a puzzle, building blocks make up the cityscape and everything appears to be physics-driven, so it can be knocked down and pushed around for some fun action.







SOMETHING IS AMISS WITH CALL OF CTHULHU

→ CYANIDE'S LONG-AWAITED ADAPTATION STILL FEELS LIKE IT'S CAUGHT BETWEEN AN ANCIENT BEAST AND A HARD PLACE

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **CYANIDE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

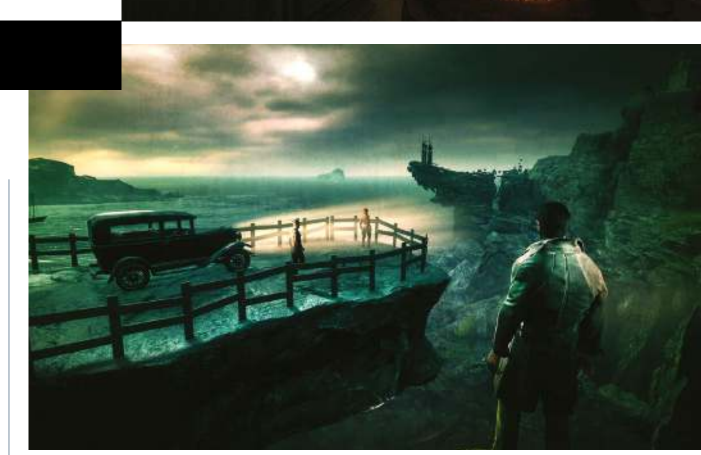
After years languishing in development, a very public false start, a change of developer and yet another hands-off demonstration, we're starting to get a little worried about *Call Of Cthulhu*.

It isn't that it doesn't show promise – because it certainly does – but there's something about this Lovecraftian-infused detective game that doesn't sit right with us. Before we get into it, let's circle back to the premise: you're a moody private investigator tasked with exploring an ominous and muddy island off the coast of Boston, Massachusetts; a grizzly murder requires your expertise and it's only through keen investigation and an almost obsessive-attraction to invading personal space and privacy that you'll be able to figure out what *really* transpired on Darkwater Isle.

Listen, we aren't being fussy, that works for us. *Call Of Cthulhu* is trying to evoke the feeling of the pen and paper RPG more so than HP Lovecraft's famed short story – or indeed any of the innovative horror games bearing the Great Old One's name that have come before it. But it's like we said before, something about Cyanide's execution isn't clicking into place. We've seen this game demoed at a distance for years now, and the pervading concerns are around pace and structure. It's as slow as hell, demanding that you crawl through every bit of text, detail and piece of information that can possibly be thrown your way. Given the somewhat questionable writing (not to mention somewhat theatrical voice acting) this is a bit of an ask. Of course, we'll once again give the studio the benefit of doubt and assume that these elements will be subject to change as *Call Of Cthulhu* edges closer to its still unknown late-2018 release date.

The studio does, of course, argue that the crawling pace is a deliberate design decision to build tension, as well as giving the game the space to establish the notion that every single person on the island hates you – with your mere presence alone putting you under immense scrutiny. In terms of structure, *Call Of Cthulhu* is focused around investigative gameplay with four pillars of forensic investigation bringing an interesting RPG element to proceedings; investing in skills such as social, physical, knowledge and investigation will give you new opportunities and lines of

IN BRIEF
A game of exploration and investigation cast on the eve of the almighty Cthulhu's monstrous return to this realm





Call Of Cthulhu shows a lot of promise, but it still feels a little under cooked. Its various elements seem interesting in a vacuum, but we're still struggling to see how they will come together to form a fun gameplay experience.



The success of *Call Of Cthulhu* will largely rest on how well the sanity effects and situations are presented in the final game. We've heard precious little on the intriguing 'phobia system' revealed this time last year.

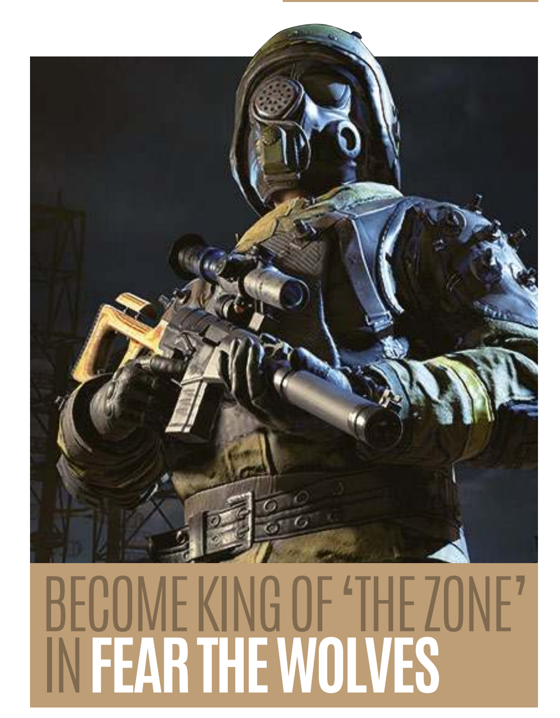


inquiry to follow in the semi-open world, even if, it seems, that all roads eventually lead to the same place.

These types of systems are difficult to demonstrate, they need to be experienced. As that wasn't an available option, all we are left to go on is what seemed to be a fairly routine set of opportunities to follow. It looks mundane and pedestrian, lacking the venomous bite that you'd expect to see from an official *Call Of Cthulhu* release.

Where this could change is with the supernatural side to the game, an element of *Call Of Cthulhu* designed to expose your sanity and prey on your insecurities. We saw only a glimpse of it this year, and none of the scenarios that push the player into the position in which you must fight the horrors of the dark place non-directly, managing your unravelling sanity against a desire to survive by any means necessary. It is here where Cyanide could succeed in executing its vision, where it could transform *Call Of Cthulhu* into a full-bodied detective story tinged with horror, rather than a drab jaunt through a turgid fishing village. What we're not seeing right now is all of its elements coalesce into one excellent whole. There are some fantastic ideas, systems and storytelling mechanics in here – we just need to see Cyanide finally prove that it can all work in perfect harmony, a result that will be as attention-arresting as it is unsettling.





BECOME KING OF 'THE ZONE' IN FEAR THE WOLVES

→ A NEW CONTENDER APPROACHES

Developed by former GSC World staff, the studio famous for *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl*, *Fear The Wolves* is an exotic take on the battle royale shooter, splicing elements of the aforementioned FPS release with the ever popular *PUBG*.

You and 99 other players drop down into a 25-square kilometre slice of Chernobyl; weapons, attachments, and armour need to be acquired on site, while a circle of radiation steadily contracts, shrinking the map and pushing surviving players into tighter and tougher combat scenarios.

There seems to be no shortage of studios looking to embrace the format popularised by *PUBG*, though few have captured our imagination quite like Vostok Games' *Fear The Wolves*. Locking the action down into a first-person perspective, the studio is taking aim at a more hardcore simulation to entice players away from *PUBG* and *Fortnite* – high-fidelity bullet physics, tighter viewpoints, and more realistic weapon handling are just some of the elements that will make *Fear The Wolves* a more aggressive entry into the tightly contested genre fray.

Where *Fear The Wolves* is really looking to set itself apart, however, is with the inclusion of AI opponents, dangerous environmental anomalies, a dynamic weather system (that can be manipulated by spectators and streaming audiences) and the opportunity to head out into the radiation in an effort to circumvent players entirely. Vostok has promised that players can expect to encounter everything from feral wolves to packs of mutants whilst you're out exploring the wilds, the latter could even be guarding high-value loot. Should you come across a full hazmat suit you'll be able to dip out of safety and into the radiation, with gas mask filters and oxygen cylinders improving your survivability in these areas – not to mention the randomised anomalies that appear all across the map, bending the laws of physics and changing the gameplay experience.

Fear The Wolves is coming to PC, PS4 and Xbox One later this year and it has our attention. Vostok is bringing the spirit of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. to battle royale and we are desperate to see how the two approaches work together.

ONRUSH USHERS IN THE RETURN OF THE OFF-ROAD ARCADE RACER

→ JOIN THE STAMPEDE THIS JUNE

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **DEEP SILVER**
DEVELOPER: **CODEMASTERS** | RELEASE: **5 JUNE 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

Codemasters isn't being coy about it – this is not another *Fuel*. The influences feeding into *Onrush* should be clear for all to see, spotted at a glance as 24 off-road vehicles battle it out for lane supremacy at breakneck speeds across sprawling dirt tracks. It features the real-time scoring of *DriveClub* fame and the intricate track design that helped elevate *Motorstorm* all those years ago. These disparate elements in turn collide with the frenetic bumper-to-bumper action of *Burnout* and the infinitely suave style of *SSX*. *Onrush* is looking to inject some fun back into off-road racing, and its approach is immediately intoxicating as it brings all of these influences together.

Onrush is far too besotted with the idea of encouraging dangerous driving to care too much about how chaotic the action is on the track. So long as you can keep within the pack, carving out your own space in the race, you should have no problem finding success amidst the anarchy. It's a game of speed and precision, of violent takedowns and outlandish stunts; *Onrush* is a game about driving fast and looking good while you're doing it. Thankfully we won't have long to wait before it's out in the wild either, bringing some action to our summer.





IN BRIEF
The creative force behind *DriveClub* and *Motorstorm* has joined with Codemasters to deliver the evolution of off-road arcade action

OPEN BETA

Codemasters is planning to run an open beta to give players a taste of the action ahead of its launch this June. The studio wants to stress test its online servers, give us a better look at the in-depth customisation options and show off its wild track design. The beta is set to go live this May for PS4 and Xbox One.



ABILITY SELECTION

Each of the eight classes will bring their own unique abilities on to the track, with Codemasters noting that this is particularly important in online play where tactics will come into play between groups of racers. The abilities range between offensive – letting you dish out devastating takedowns, for example – to more defence- and support-oriented options that highlight how versatile this racing game truly is.

ALTERNATIVE RACING

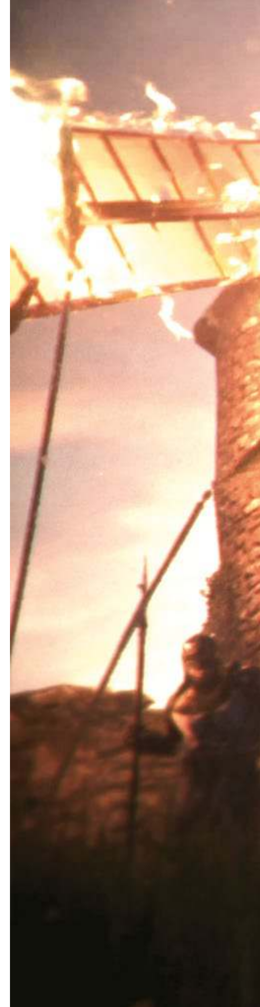
Where *Onrush* threatens to divide players is in its somewhat split approach to the racing genre. The studio has said that there is no overt concept of starting or finishing a course, with racers coming in and out of the 'race' at different points on the track, with the focus on scoring points and keeping in the thick of it to continue engaging in the action. Whether that'll be enough for some remains to be seen.



CLASS SELECTION

You may have noticed that *Onrush* features a variety of different vehicle types, but did you know that there are also eight distinct classes in the game: Blade, Outlaw, Vortex, Charger, Interceptor, Dynamo, Titan and Enforcer, with each of these classes having their own specific changes to handling and abilities. You'll be able to switch between them all after you wipe out, letting you keep pace with the shifting nature of the competition.





A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE IS NOT A GAME FOR THE MUSOPHOBIC

→ AN EMOTIONAL ADVENTURE THROUGH A WORLD WROUGHT WITH DECAY… AND RATS

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE** | DEVELOPER: **ASOBO STUDIO** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

It's fascinating to see how far a dedicated and passionate team can take a project in just 12 months. This time last year we were given the opportunity to see an early technical demonstration of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, with developer Asobo Studio looking to showcase a killer concept driven by some truly exceptional technology. That's what tech demos are for; they are purpose built to immediately impress and ignite the imagination of all those that see them.

We leapt at the opportunity to see the game properly in action for the first time; eager to discover whether Asobo, a studio known largely for its contract work on everything from *The Crew* to *Quantum Break*, could pull off something as ambitious as *A Plague Tale*. We weren't disappointed. "Last year, with the technical demo the mood and the characters were there," says David Dedeine, the chief creative officer and co-founder of Asobo as he eagerly shows off a level from the beginning of the adventure. "But the challenge was to take the premise and the tone into an actual level of the game. I think that's what we've done and are showing here today… at least I hope that's what we've done."

What we're seeing is gorgeous. An aqueduct snakes off into the distance, its visibility impaired by the thick mist rolling through the hills. There are two siblings, Amicia and Hugo, who are desperately trying to push on – the Inquisition forcing them to flee from their home, from the safety afforded by castle walls – though a variety of challenges stand in their way. The biggest, of course, are the thousands upon thousands of rats that occupy almost every space that is cast in shadow.

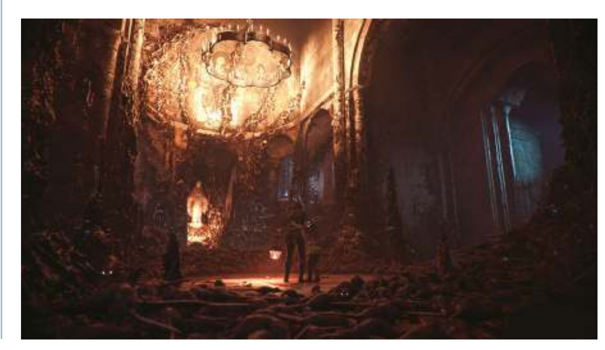
"The reason we picked this level is because we felt as if it was the right moment to expose some of the features that we want to communicate," continues Dedeine. "We had to transform this premise into something real." 'Real' is right; real and terrifying, soaked in atmosphere. Dedeine describes *A Plague Tale* as being fuelled by the "emotional journey" that Amicia and Hugo are caught up in; Amicia, the playable character, has been charged with getting her younger brother to a sanctuary before a rare blood condition consumes him, while Hugo, a five year old, merely seems happy to be in the outside world for the very first time – his innocence a ray of sunshine in a world otherwise tinged with death and decay. The relationship between the characters is an interesting one, easily compared to that of Joel and Ellie from *The Last Of Us* or the siblings caught up in *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*.

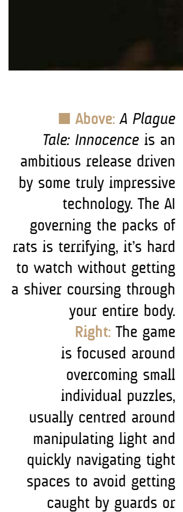
> "THERE ARE THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF RATS THAT OCCUPY ALMOST EVERY SPACE THAT IS CAST IN SHADOW"

What this level also demonstrates, however, is the type of engagement we can expect across this 10-12 hour adventure. *A Plague Tale* is, in essence a stealth-puzzle game whereby Amicia must guide Hugo to safety by any means necessary. Much of this involves using light to funnel the feral rats from area to area – or into the path of unsuspecting guards, their screams providing ample distraction so that you can move by unnoticed.

Amicia is but a teenager and so her options are limited. Resources can be gathered and used to assemble a torch, a flaming ray of light that will cast a protective pool over the kids for a short period of time. This is a temporary measure, of course, and if that should fail then Amicia can look to using her sling to smash out light sources from afar. Each section of the level feels like its own contained puzzle – some of the solutions can be particularly harrowing too. Amicia and Hugo may be kids, but the lengths they will go to survive certainly paints them as the potential villains of this story.

We're a little concerned that *A Plague Tale* could get very familiar, very quickly. But that fear is undercut by a genuine interest in where Asobo takes this. The rats still steal the show, moving fluidly and evoking a very real sense of immediate terror as they do. The relationships between the characters seems interesting enough, and the look of the world plays on the imagination. What we need to see, as Asobo continues pushing towards its early 2019 release date, is whether the studio can inject more variety into the design and execution of the puzzles.

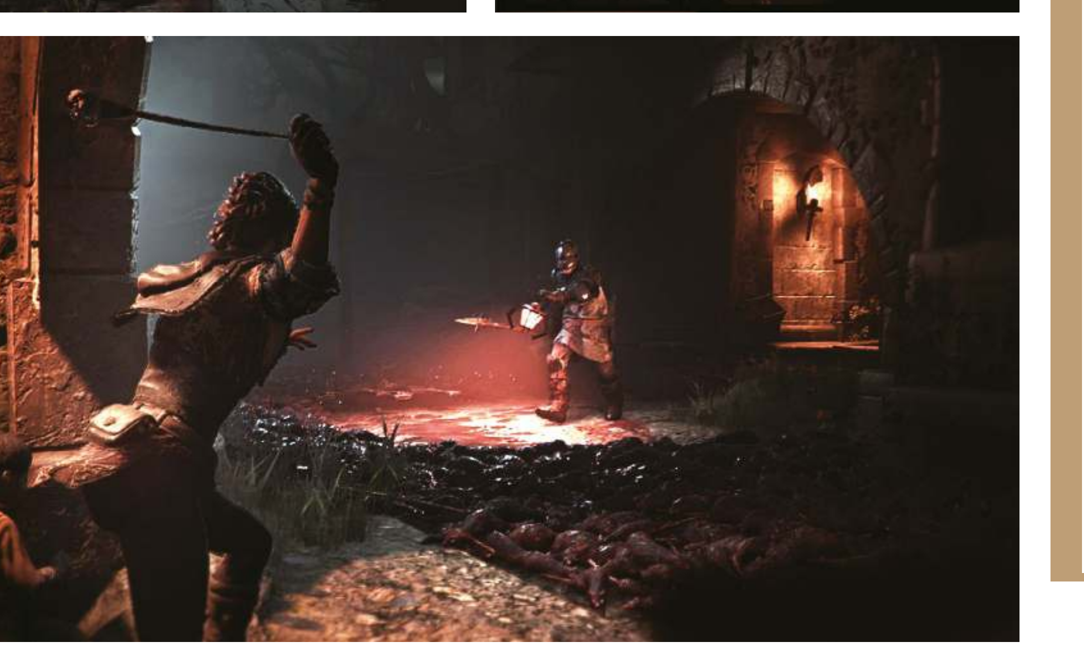




■ Above: *A Plague Tale: Innocence* is an ambitious release driven by some truly impressive technology. The AI governing the packs of rats is terrifying, it's hard to watch without getting a shiver coursing through your entire body.
Right: The game is focused around overcoming small individual puzzles, usually centred around manipulating light and quickly navigating tight spaces to avoid getting caught by guards or eaten by rats.

IN BRIEF

A brother and sister must survive in a world in which deadly swarms of rats threaten to upend everything

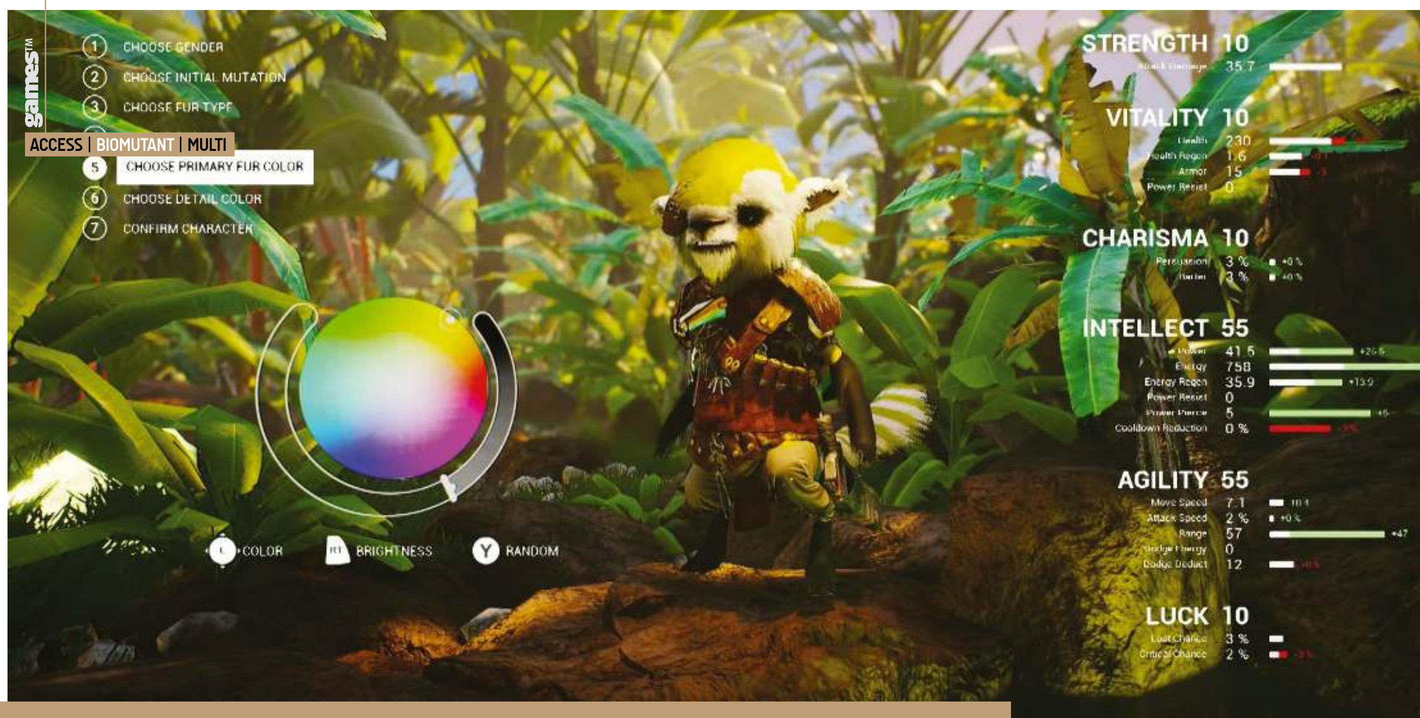


SMALL TEAM, BIG AMBITIONS

In spite of the large scope of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, it might surprise you to learn that the team behind the game is relatively small. Asobo Studio has just 45 staff on the project – particularly surprising when you discover how much of the game's impressive tech has been built in-house.

"It's built using our own engine. We've been using this tech for 15 years now, we are pretty used to it," considers David Dedeine, reflecting on the creation of the Procedural Home Engine in 2002. "Obviously, it's been refreshed over time, there is no common point [in the code] between its introduction and now, but it gives us the required flexibility to create this game. With this full flexibility we are able to handle the rendering, the AI and behaviour of the rats… sometimes third-party engines are great to do some stuff, but if you've got the right team of people that can do it in-house then it's better to have your own engine. *A Plague Tale* would not be possible without it."

It's about letting the team be agile in the development progress, and Dedeine assures us that the team is still on track to hit its milestones through the year. "We are just past Alpha right now. Of course, we will have issues like anybody else, but so far we are on track for release in 2019!"



BIOMUTANT PUTS THE SURVIVAL OF A WORLD IN YOUR HANDS

CHARACTER CREATION TOOLS REVEAL A SURPRISING DEPTH TO THIS OPEN-WORLD ACTION-RPG

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **THQ NORDIC** | DEVELOPER: **EXPERIMENT 101** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

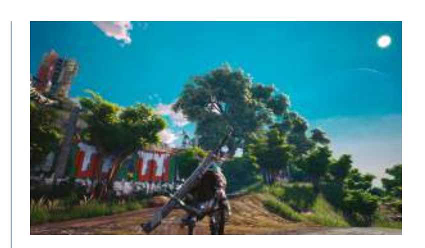
Ever since its reveal late last year we've been keeping a watchful eye on *Biomutant*, the open world, action-RPG from developer Experiment 101. *Biomutant* is, after all, a different take on a genre that can feel pretty worn at times – it's exciting to see a title tackle an open world and RPG game design in way that feels decidedly fresh and different, even if it does look a little rough around the edges after two years of development.

Biomutant is a game interested in exploring environmental conservation, positioning you as a literal force from nature intent on ensuring the survival of the world. At the centre of this sandbox is a giant tree that feeds all of the life in the game world, its ancient roots stretching out across five corners of the map – each of them being slowly poisoned by an array of mischievous beasts and foes. Defeating these towering threats will all feed into an endgame that reflects your various successes and failures, the survival or deterioration of this lush land resting entirely on the shoulders of the anthropomorphic kung-fu critter that you create and evolve throughout the course of your adventure.

In fact, exploring evolution is a big part of *Biomutant*'s design and appeal. The character creation tool ties into this theme in a pretty clever way, giving you a hex grid and sliders to help you build out your champion. You'll be tasked with recoding your DNA, affecting purely cosmetic elements such as fur shape and density, to the size of specific body parts that will ultimately change your proficiencies in combat and exploration. "The look of the character is actually tied into the stats," teases studio co-founder Stefan Ljungqvist. "So if you have a bigger head you [will] probably have more intelligence. Why do you want more intelligence? Well, if you want to use psionic-abilities it's probably going to be a good thing, right? It's like being a magic user in a fantasy RPG. All of this depends on how you want to spec your initial stats."

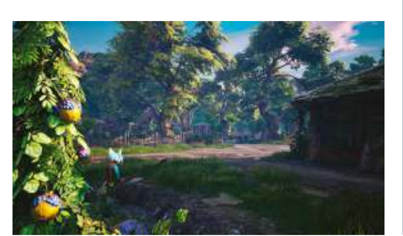
Having a range of cybernetic and biomutant abilities directly entangled with your DNA sounds fascinating, particularly as it is supported by fairly intuitive free-form melee combat and gunplay, with the latter of those options becoming more viable as you progress through the game and begin to play with weapon crafting – a system which the studio has suggested could support hundreds of thousands of different variations. It's an ambitious setup, that's for sure; the mixture of traditional martial art combat styles, each of which need to be learned and mastered, with unconventional third-person shooting systems has caught our eye, while the stunning world and art design has kept us coming back for more. *Biomutant* is coming later this year, and it's threatening to be the surprise gem of 2018.

IN BRIEF
The debut game from Swedish developer Experiment 101, an outfit established in 2015 and staffed by former Avalanche Studios employees

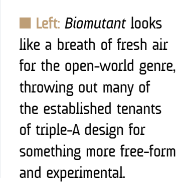




Right: While *Biomutant* will indeed feature a dynamic weather system, it's also going one step further. The studio is promising a full seasonal system that will affect the climate of the world.







Left: *Biomutant* looks like a breath of fresh air for the open-world genre, throwing out many of the established tenants of triple-A design for something more free-form and experimental.

SAN! NI! ICHI! HAJIME!!!

NiPPON MARATHON

THE RACE HAS BEGUN
ON EARLY ACCESS!



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> "It stopped being a game for me anymore and just became my religion'"
>
> **JANE NG, LEAD ARTIST, CAMPO SANTO**

WHY I ♥...

DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

JANE NG
LEAD ARTIST, CAMPO SANTO

A game that I recently fell in love with was Dragon Age: Inquisition *– I love that game to bits. For a while I was so obsessed with it that it stopped being a game for me anymore and just became my religion. I don't know, I play a lot of games and I've got to know a few of the leads from that project – which is such a privilege – and there's just something about that game that is super special; it really made me feel about video games a way that I never thought I could feel anymore. Like, you know when you play games when you're a 12-year-old kid? Games just felt so magical then, they gave you a different kind of reality. In a way, playing games as an adult rarely feels like that, but there is something about Dragon Age: Inquisition that just made me feel like that again. It renewed my faith in games in a way, and I didn't realise that games could do that to me anymore. I just love it.*




THE GOD

FATHER

SONY SANTA MONICA STUDIO'S CREATIVE DIRECTOR **CORY BARLOG** DISCUSSES THE CHALLENGES, HURDLES, NAYSAYERS AND TRIUMPHS OF HIS ATTEMPT TO MODERNISE **GOD OF WAR** AS WE GO HANDS-ON WITH THE NEAR-FINISHED ACTION EPIC



VERY FEW GAME FRANCHISES AND EVEN FEWER HEROES IN THOSE SERIES ARE AFFORDED THE OPPORTUNITY TO GROW OR AGE. VERY FEW GAME SERIES MANAGE TO SPAN THREE GENERATIONS OF CONSOLES. VERY FEW DEVELOPERS ARE GIVEN THE TIME AND TRUST NEEDED TO PURSUE SUCH EVOLUTIONS. BUT THEN, VERY FEW SERIES ARE GOD OF WAR, AND VERY FEW HAVE A LEAD AS ICONIC AND MAGNETIC AS KRATOS.

But times have changed, and the angsty, tortured, anti-authority antihero is moving with the times, much as his makers have. "We as developers here have grown," Sony Santa Monica creative director Cory Barlog tells us. "I personally feel a lot of parallels in the fact that he left Greece and wandered, and I feel like I left Sony and I sort of wandered, and during that time I learned a lot." Barlog returned to the studio in 2013 after a few years away working with Avalanche and Crystal Dynamics, having started out as animation director on *God Of War,* working his way up to writer and game director through to *GOWIII* before he left in 2010.

"I met a lot of people and I experienced development from a lot of different perspectives. I experienced a lot of different creative voices and understandings," he continues. "After I finished the Tomb Raider game, I realised I wanted to make something that has a bit more dramatic weight and meat on it. The earlier games, they had some dramatic weight, but I think they were sort of reflective of that 'thumb your nose at authority' attitude of making an antihero. There weren't a lot of antiheroes at the time. It was an interesting thing to tackle, and then after that it was like the second Prince Of Persia was a darker, meaner Prince and everyone was making the antihero. So it became the note that everyone's hitting, and not to say that we weren't also just hitting a singular note. I think that when we started working on this not only did I have inside me the desire to make something that meant a little bit more to me, I think everybody I was working with had the exact same feeling."

And so Kratos has been wandering. For how long we're not sure, and Barlog isn't telling. In that time, however, he has left Greece and travelled north to a strange and in some ways far more magical realm. He attempted to isolate himself, but somewhere along the way he met a woman and they had a son, and now things are a bit more complex again. This all feels a little more sedate and emotionally contained than the Kratos we once knew, but underneath it all the Santa Monica Studio knows that what's inside him cannot change. "During that time I think there's a belief in his mind that he thinks he's better off being away from people, because *clearly* when he's around them he destroys entire pantheons," Barlog reflects. "But the reality is that I think being alone with your demons does nothing but feed your demons. It takes him a long time to realise, and I think he almost needs to hit a rock bottom for himself before he understands." »

We found the term 'rock bottom' to be an interesting one with its connection to addiction and recovery, and mused with Barlog as to what degree he thinks that Kratos had been hooked on his own anger like a drug. As it turns out, it may run even deeper, as to the team's mind all demigods come with a side effect; an unforeseen consequence of their mortal bodies carrying within them the power of a god. "Kratos' side effect [to being a demigod] is this unbelievable storm inside of him," Barlog explains. "I think that not only is it kind of this manifestation of his own physical being; it's something that he has to just live with his whole life, figuring out how to cope and control. It is kind of something that he did become, in a way, addicted to. It was the easier route."

It's hard to believe that the events of Kratos' seven previous games could be described as an easy route, but Barlog gets into the deeper psychological meaning of his observation. "It seemed like he took the hard route, but the easiest route is to blame other people for your problems, and honestly that's all he did. It was the gods, it was Ares, it was Athena, everybody else was at fault except him. His way of fixing it was to have them remove the memories of the bad things that he had done. You don't process anything and you don't get through anything by forgetting something. You figure out how to live with it and not make the same mistakes tomorrow."

In some ways this all goes back to his Spartan upbringing and the complete lack of empathy or self-reflection that it instilled in him. "It's sort of a cycle of this guy was trained in one of the most brutal and psychologically damaging military training programs in the history of mankind. The Spartans are renowned for beginning military training at eight years old and 20 years of beating down the human in making the perfect soldier," Barlog continues. "For him, in the Spartan code, it was so brutal that there wasn't anything about it that was, 'Good job soldier'. It was more like all you did was find the fault to make that fault go away, and when that fault went away you found another fault and you stamped it down until that fault went away. There was no benefit to compliments, to say that you did good." Not, we would think, a great mindset for restarting life as a father, but that's where we find Kratos as *God Of War* begins.

The relationship between Kratos and Atreus starts out very tensely, the dialogue terse and dripping with things unsaid. Emotions reveal themselves in the beats between lines. It's in the things Atreus holds back from saying. It's in the way Kratos reaches out for – but never comforts – his son. When Kratos tells Atreus curtly, "Do not be sorry. Be better," we can't help but wonder how common that phrase might have been during military training back in Sparta when Kratos was growing up, just without the 'do not be sorry' part. It's not a lack of love holding either of them back, but perhaps fear; fear on both their parts that showing affection could be a sign of weakness. Whether there's more to be fearful about for Kratos hangs in the air. What consequence could there be for the son of a demigod?

In Barlog's mind, the developing relationship between father and son is all part of Kratos' redemption and recovery. "The interesting thing for him right now is just making those small steps, the small 'one day at a time' kind of movements," he tells us. "They yield little victories, and those little victories are the things that he is celebrating. The ability to actually relate to his son and give him a decent compliment, tell him he did something good. Because really, at the end of the day, that's what Atreus wants. It's what a lot of children want. It's what we all want. We want to be respected and acknowledged and seen by our parents."

Atreus' desire for recognition and respect from his father is clear in how he tries to help and intervene in the action through the game. As a co-op partner Atreus is not immune to attack and can be picked up and threatened, mostly by mid-level enemies from what we've seen so far. Thankfully, a quick punch or tap with the axe will usually free him, but otherwise he is a great asset in combat. For instance, one challenging ghoul will evade attacks from any range, vanishing and reappearing to throw poison at you, but with its attention occupied by Kratos, Atreus can stun it with an arrow and open it up to a direct assault from his father. In wider brawls Atreus will call out to warn you of incoming attacks, giving you a verbal alert to supplement the visual indicator. And his arrows do chip away at health; they're not just for show.

"The original concept was that kind of balance for Kratos, so that Kratos comes in with brute force, experience and strength, a hulk if you will, and I think his son always needed to be that balance," says Barlog. "Even at the earliest point when my son started talking and I was realising, 'Oh my gosh, that is something. This tiny little kid has more power than I do'. My son is learning Swedish »



"THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE FANTASTIC THAT I THINK IS KIND OF HITTING A DOPAMINE BUTTON THAT YOU'RE GOING TO GET TIRED OF"

Kratos has lost some of the fluidity of swinging blades around in combat, but the Leviathan Axe is a fantastic new asset. Its versatility as a ranged and close-combat weapon allows for a more tactical style of play.





A QUICK RECAP OF KRATOS PAST FOR NEWCOMERS

GOW: ASCENSION
(PS3, 2013)



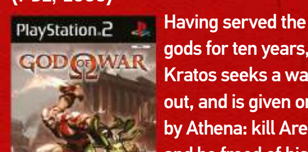
A prequel to the events of the main trilogy, set a few months after Kratos was tricked by Ares into killing his own family and breaking his blood oath to serve the god of war in retaliation. It chronicles his escape from the Furies, who were holding him as punishment for betraying Ares and realisation he must serve the gods to find redemption.

GOW: CHAINS OF OLYMPUS
(PSP, 2008)



During his ten years of service to the gods as a means of finding redemption, Kratos is sent on a mission by Athena to find the missing sun god Helios. This puts him on a collision course with the Underworld, a last chance to be reunited with his daughter and a final decision to return to the world in order to save it from Atlas' attempts to topple Olympus.

GOD OF WAR
(PS2, 2005)



Having served the gods for ten years, Kratos seeks a way out, and is given one by Athena: kill Ares and be freed of his guilt. The only thing that can kill a god, however, is Pandora's Box, so that's what he seeks, eventually managing to open the box and be granted the power of a god to take Ares down. The gods refuse to free him of his nightmares of killing his family, but when he attempts to commit suicide Athena saves him and offers him the now-vacant position of god of war left by Ares.







GOW: GHOST OF SPARTA
(PSP, 2010)



Now the god of war, Kratos travels to the city of Atlantis and reveals a new plot from his past surrounding Ares and his dead brother Deimos. The tale takes him to his mother Callisto, to the destruction of Atlantis, a return to Sparta and eventually to the Domain of Death, where he finds his long-lost brother, only to lose him in a final battle with Thanatos. In the aftermath it is revealed (but not to Kratos) that Athena may be Kratos' sister.

GOW: BETRAYAL
(MOBILE, 2007)



At the leader of the Spartan army, Kratos is leaving a path of death and destruction in his wake as his native people wage war all over Greece, much to the frustration of the gods. He is constantly being attacked by monsters and beset by an assassin of unknown origin. Despite a warning from Zeus that the pursuit of the assassin must stop, Kratos persists, creating further tension between the Spartan and Olympians.

GOD OF WAR II
(PS2, 2007)



Having angered the gods for too long, Zeus conceives a plot to kill Kratos, tricking him into spending his godly power to defeat the Colossus of Rhodes and sending him to the Underworld as a result. On his journey, Kratos meets the Titan Gaia, who offers a plan to reverse time and collectively get their revenge. Before Kratos can kill Zeus, Athena sacrifices herself to allow his escape and reveals that Zeus is Kratos' father. Kratos travels back in time to bring the defeated Titans to the present world.

GOD OF WAR III
(PS3, 2010)



Kratos and the Titans storm Mount Olympus, but Gaia betrays him. Falling into the River Styx, the spirit of Athena tells him how he can defeat Zeus, which she now sees is necessary for humanity to find hope. Kratos finds Pandora to quench the flame of Olympus, defeats Zeus and Gaia, and discovers that the power of hope has been inside him since he opened Pandora's box. Kratos impales himself on the Blade of Olympus to release hope into the world.

IT'S NOT AN ESCORT MISSION



THE LAST OF US (2013)

Leaving aside the section where you actually play as Ellie for a short while, your primary goal through *The Last Of Us* is to protect her and help her navigate the world. With only a few exceptions, the game does a fantastic job of keeping Ellie out of sight during stealth section, keeps her movements accurate during water sections (where she can't swim) and gives her some helpful abilities for combat assists too.

ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST (2010)

Trip is a great AI companion who is nominally in control of Monkey thanks to a slave headband. What this ultimately means is that Monkey has to keep Trip alive or he dies too. Thankfully, Trip's abilities as a hacker and tech expert means she is vital in traversing the game world, and she largely keeps herself out of trouble quite nicely. She also ably acts as a co-op partner for some puzzle and navigation sections.

PORTAL (2007)

The Companion Cube is such an important figure in the Portal story that we couldn't write a list like this without acknowledging it. Sure, it doesn't say a lot (unless you really listen carefully), and it doesn't do a lot (if you don't consider its immense emotional support important), but it is a great example of an escort mission that never feels like a burden. The Cube protects, it drives you and nobly sacrifices itself for you in the end.

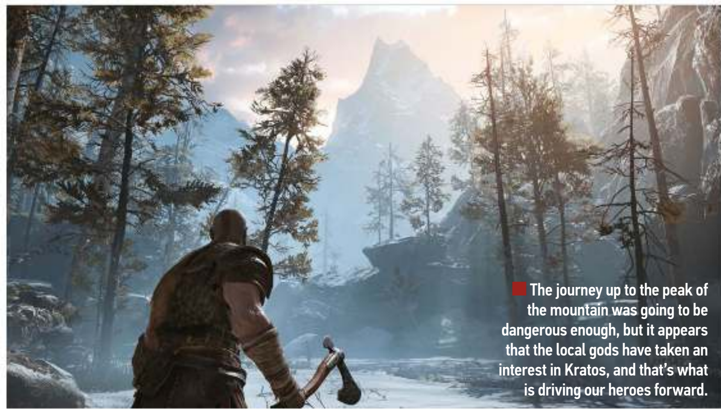
HALF-LIFE 2 (2004)

Thanks to speedy health recovery and some sharp aiming, Vance is a hugely helpful assist character to have around. In the continuing episodes of *Half-Life 2*, Alyx Vance became an even more rounded companion, as her AI programming was designed to complement Freeman's abilities and offer strategic options that would otherwise not be available.

BIOSHOCK INFINITE (2013)

Elizabeth is a rare example of an AI companion who is exceedingly more powerful in many respects than the player character. Booker doesn't have control over Elizabeth's actions, but can ask for assistance, and Elizabeth is more than happy to rummage around for useful items like money, food and ammunition as and when you need it. When you're really in trouble, she can open a tear and change the game for you.


The weapons and armour of both Kratos and Atreus can be fully upgraded and modified, giving them increased health or perks in battle.


The journey up to the peak of the mountain was going to be dangerous enough, but it appears that the local gods have taken an interest in Kratos, and that's what is driving our heroes forward.





faster than I can learn Swedish, so now he is teaching me parts of the language. That kind of power dynamic is necessary. You can't just say he's more powerful than Kratos. It's more like you're in a land in which you don't have the ability to learn the local language very easily."

So as well as assisting Kratos in combat, Atreus is his translator in a strange land where he still hasn't picked up the language. There's magic in the runes of northern Europe that's easy to see but difficult to understand. Much of what's been shown of this realm is cold and unforgiving; stark frozen lakes, bare trees, barren and abandoned homes. But as we got to see after a couple of hours of play, something far more colourful and magical is revealed. We won't get too much into it here, but let us just say that God Of War has lost none of its delight in the weirder side of myth and legend.

And much as this aspect of the relationship was drawn directly from Barlog's own life, so the rest of the studio chipped in with stories to help flesh out the experience. "There are a lot of great, very real moments that came from us just really putting a mirror on ourselves and finding a moment that doesn't just feel like we're just writing this and throwing something in. This has a ring of truth." And as we say, that comes across as much in what isn't said and in the performances the team has captured.

But above all else, what was important to Sony Santa Monica Studio was that Atreus should never be a burden to the player, let alone an annoyance. "Even from the very beginning – we're talking four weeks into this when I had first come back and presented a small PowerPoint – that was a very big point that I wanted to hammer home to everybody: this is not an escort mission," Barlog insists. "This is not you constantly protecting this kid; it is more like you need to figure out how to make a connection, right? A connection that is going to save *you*. Kratos is the one being saved by his son. In a way, the son is just being guided through this milestone in his life."

But Barlog admits to us it's been a hard sell to players at large, and to his own team over time. "We did playtests and people just hated it, because they came in and they would have that viewpoint that is like, 'I just don't want to do an escort mission. I hate kids. I don't want to carry a kid along with me. It's dumb. Get rid of the kid. It doesn't make sense'. Just a lot of doubt. But then once we got all of the mechanical back-and-forth between those two, once we got that feeling, the core loop of how he would be integrated within your moment to moment combat experience, it was absolutely that kind exclamation mark over the soldier's head in *Metal Gear Solid* [makes alarm sound from the game]. Everybody just realised, 'Oh man, this is great'." Which was very much our experience playing the game as well.

"CLEARLY WHEN HE'S AROUND PEOPLE HE DESTROYS ENTIRE PANTHEONS"

And so much about the game seems like it has changed, from the setting to the tone to the combat. It all feels like a different kind of experience, and yet so much feels the same too. You can still go around smashing pots for resources, gathering health and other trinkets from fallen enemies, and chests are scattered around with useful items. Larger enemies require a more considered approach. Taking on the fire troll, for instance, you can interrupt its fire-throwing attack by chucking the axe into its arm. And further combos can be unlocked over time, for both range and close combat, offering plenty of opportunities for fights to evolve and change as you progress through the game.

Every step of the way, it seems Santa Monica Studio has been probing, questioning and challenging to find the right balance of old and new. "I was talking with some people on the first month of the project where people were saying, 'I just don't understand how we can take this more fantastic and mythological world and make it a bit more personal. Are we going to lose the danger and the spectacle?' Barlog reveals. "And it was also the time I was pushing on, 'Let's push the camera in and not let the action get very far away. Let's never make Kratos a little speck on the screen. Let's always feel like we're seeing everything from his perspective'. I think through the discussions the realisation is that most of the great experiences are often grounded or weighted in this sort of relatability. There's something about the fantastic that I think is kind of hitting a dopamine button that you're going to get tired of, unless it means something."

For all the changes *God Of War* introduces, the camera is really the one with the most collateral effects, and it's at the heart of bringing the fantastic and the personal together. By abandoning the fixed camera position for an over-the-shoulder view, we get a closer view of everything Kratos does. We may lose the spectacular shows of live combat from the past, but we gain an even more brutal and rewarding vantage point in return. With the camera as tight to Kratos as it is, we have never been drawn closer to him than now. His imposing figure, always clearly muscular, now feels almost monstrous next to his son. On occasion we glimpse him as if from Atreus' point of view, and he is terrifying. And this close up we can even see the texture of the ashes »

that were grafted to Kratos' skin so many years ago. The full weight of the Ghost of Sparta's curse is more apparent now than ever.

However, with the change of view comes gameplay sacrifices to help bridge the gap. "I was talking about the new camera, and when we were talking about if we do this new camera, I realised doing a jump is going to be really difficult," says Barlog. "You *can* do it, but depth perception, the nausea inducing of constant double jumping, you've got to pull the camera further back, and I wanted the camera in as close as possible. So the same thing was going through our minds with the blades, because if you just said it's Kratos with the Blades of Chaos in the Norse world, everybody is going to fall back on the patterns of Square, Square, Triangle. Even now, we offer in the game an ability to remap your controls to the classic God Of War controls, but we chose the control scheme that we chose because it is, to us and to time-tested playtesting, the best layout, because you want to be able to have your right thumb on the analogue to be able to look around at all times, and if you're constantly taking it off to attack it really makes it difficult. So I think we realised that it's going to be hard for people to adopt a new control scheme with the same weapon. They're not going to be able to parse that. But if you throw a new weapon in with the new camera and new location and new control scheme, it's a little bit easier of a pill to swallow."

So from one artistic and narrative decision to bring players closer to Kratos than ever, many of the staples of the character needed to be put aside. And while you might think the blades were the hardest thing to let go of, Barlog feels differently. "For me, it was difficult, but once everything clicked with the Leviathan Axe and the ability to throw, recall, the ability to literally throw and freeze an enemy in place, and go about your fight and recall it later, just to me it was like, 'Okay, I get it'," he assures us. "The hardest thing to let go of was the jump in the beginning, simply because I'm one of those neurotic jump-button hitters, just running through a game jumping, much to the annoyance of most of the combat design team, when I was on the earlier games. I just adopted a whole new thing to annoy them, which was throw the axe into every surface in the entire game. When we would do group playthroughs where I would have everybody in the design team and art team in the conference room, I would be looking up at a rock or a tree limb and throwing the axe at it as I'm running through. People were like, 'Stop it!' There was a reason, because I wanted to make sure there was collision literally everywhere, and the earlier you start testing everything the better, but letting go of the jump for me was like, 'Am I going to lose that constant input of the platforming?'."

From our experience, the action is different, but in a pleasing way. Combat is slower, but as brutal as ever. Chaining together light and heavy attacks gives you the same kind of rewarding juggle combos, crowd control is as important with larger groups, and stunning an enemy opens up the opportunity for a gruesome killing blow. The camera perhaps doesn't luxuriate in the destruction to quite the same degree as in the past, but that doesn't make these moments any less wince-inducing. And while the axe appears for now to be the only melee weapon, you can also fight bare-handed, opening another branch of combos.

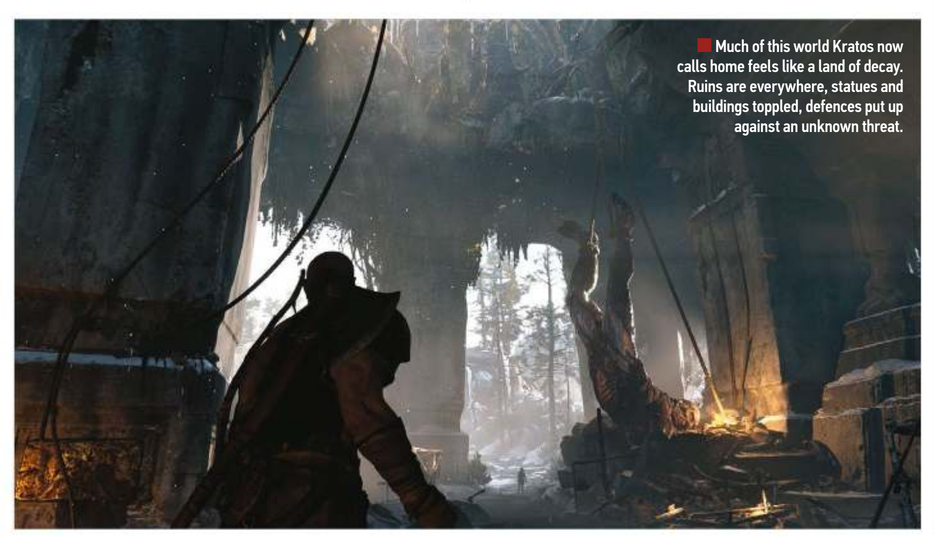
There's also just more agency in the combat now than there was before. Every move feels more deliberate, threats come from everywhere and cannot always been seen. And with the camera in close, you're no longer a spectator triggering incredible moves by a speck on the screen. You're right in the thick of the action, aiming with L2, throwing with R1, dodging, rolling, punching and then recalling with Triangle, catching Draugrs as the Leviathan Axe returns to Kratos' hand.

We only got a brief introduction to the deep and branching upgrade system that the game has to offer, too. Runes can be added to the axe that give you new special abilities, the axe itself can be upgraded to improve damage, defence and many other elements by the blacksmith Brok. He can also craft you new armour for both Kratos and Atreus, which changes their appearance in the game as well as offering better stats, and he can upgrade Atreus' bow and generally buff your items with the resources you find on your travels. How we'll come by him deeper into the journey we're not sure, but perhaps we'll meet his estranged brother Sindri, or else he'll make himself available by some other means. There's a full map menu to explore, but what we've seen of the early story doesn't imply a lot of back-and-forth will be taking place.

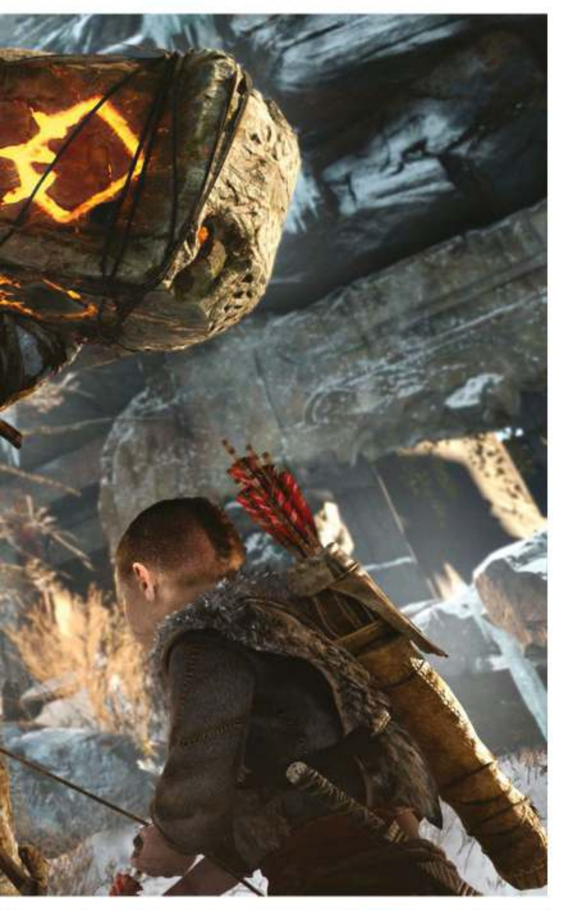
The central mission for the pair is simple enough, although what is driving it remains a mystery, and the »



Even in a battle against a troll like this, Atreus can make himself useful. By tapping away at him with arrows (requested with a press of Square) the troll can be distracted long enough for Kratos to swing away at the back of his legs.



Much of this world Kratos now calls home feels like a land of decay. Ruins are everywhere, statues and buildings toppled, defences put up against an unknown threat.











THE ART OF WAR

Sony Santa Monica has pinpointed this piece of artwork (above) by Jose Peña as the moment when much of the vision for *God Of War* came together. We asked Cory Barlog to talk us through what caught his attention about this piece as we look at some of the finer details that went on to inspire the final game.



THE NORDIC VISION

"Honestly it was like he crawled inside my head and captured a still image, but it was a still image I don't think my conscious brain was able to see," Barlog reveals. "I wrote a short story about them going on their first hunt and then had some conversations with [Peña], and what he came back with, to me, was that touchstone."



SOME COSTUME CHANGES

"We did refine the costuming he had," Barlog says of Kratos' look in the art. "It was a bit Ned Stark or Jon Snow, the giant fur cape kind of thing, but we started to refine all of that and realise as cool as it looks, it's a little bit unrealistic for him to be able to manoeuvre and have combat in it, and plus it's just not really fitting for him."



AN UNFRIENDLY WORLD

One element Peña captured immediately was the sense of constant threat in the world, according to Barlog. "For me, the big thing was that I wanted to make sure they were isolated not just in this part of northern Europe that is not very populated, but isolated from literally anybody that is friendly. They have a very small cast of people that actually interact with them in a positive way, and everyone else is pretty aggressive. It is a land of monsters, if you will."



FATHER AND SON

Peña's art also captured the dynamic between father and son immediately, with Kratos guarding his son, but with Atreus already drawing a dagger too. "While Kratos will have an instinct to help his son, part of the way his brain and his training would have brought him up was that he would have still made sure that his son would never be in a situation of helplessness," says Barlog. "They would go prepared for whatever there is so that you never feel like it's an escort mission."



Every death is a learning moment for Atreus, who is not as hardened as his father to loss of life. While he is keen to learn, he also seems to have an instinct to protect the innocent.

KRATOS AND THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

WHAT THE **KÜBLER-ROSS GRIEF CYCLE** CAN TELL US ABOUT GOD OF WAR

If we look at the classic five stages of grief, we can see a path for Kratos that saw him through the early stages in the original games and now in the later stages in this new release.

1 DENIAL Having been tricked into killing his own family, Kratos had his memories wiped of the event, something that was only corrected after killing Orkos in *Ascension*. This could be taken as a very literal form of denial of the loss of his wife and daughter, removing the memory and guilt he felt.

2 ANGER Well, this is the big one, isn't it? It would be fair to say that Kratos was lost in this stage of the grief cycle for pretty much the entire time we've known him. From the moment he awakened from his denial he was on a warpath of vengeance that left the Greek pantheon in its wake.

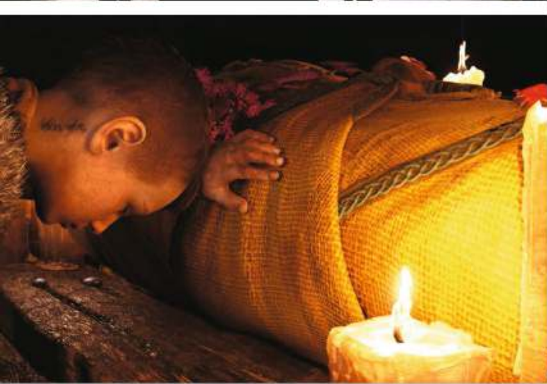
3 BARGAINING Once again we have to look at action and infer intention, but at the end of *God Of War III*, Kratos takes his own life rather than give the power of hope to Athena. It's a final act that attempts to offer his life in return for an end to his suffering and the suffering he has been inflicting on others. A pretty extreme and unsuccessful bargain.

4 DEPRESSION From what we've learned about the time between *God Of War III* and this new chapter in Kratos' life, he's been wandering for many years, isolating himself from other people for fear of raining down further suffering on the world. Somewhere along the way he lost the will to keep fighting.

5 ACCEPTANCE – We get the impression that this is where we're rejoining Kratos, emerging from depression and trying to find acceptance in both his own mind and in the eyes of his son. Can this relationship really help to break the cycle of grief and bring Kratos out the other side of this decades-long struggle?







force chasing them malevolent and unseen. Atreus' mother seems to have died, and they wish to take her ashes to the top of the nearby mountain as per her final request. Kratos is convinced that Atreus is not ready, that he is too upset and quick to anger (he knows a thing or two about that) to survive the challenges of the journey, but with agents of Odin seemingly on their tale and wanting something from Kratos, they have no choice. Spectral birds called Odin's Ravens can be spotted and dispersed by the axe (one of many collectable items in the game), hinting at the Norse god's continued – but hands-off – interest. The local deity is aware of Kratos' past and presence, and that's not going to be good news.

An extended fight with an unnamed agent of Odin early on gives us a glimpse of the challenge ahead. His speed, agility and power all seem to far outstrip Kratos, and he is ultimately beaten (perhaps not permanently) by his hubris, underestimating the aging demigod's will to survive. Kratos barely scrapes through the confrontation, and this was boss one. The challenges ahead for Kratos promise to be tough, and we have to say many of the fights we encountered took a lot more thought and patience than we first imagined.

But the spectacle of the whole thing remains massively impressive. That the PS4 delivers good-looking games has stopped being noteworthy on its own, but how Sony's developers are harnessing that power to bring us new visions continues to impress. For *God Of War*, the big visual concept is a single-shot style that means there are no cuts from the start to the finish of the game. It's a stunning idea that gives the adventure a breathless quality. "I have been chewing on this particular concept for years," Barlog reveals. "Even before I got here I was fascinated with this idea about having a single shot all of the way through the game. We sort of started to do this in *God Of War 1* where we went from the menu and went into the cinematic and then went directly into the game, and I thought that sort of seamlessness, the reaction from people was so positive."

In just a few minutes of gameplay, perhaps even interrupted by death screens and hopping into menus, the effect may not be all that clear, but the whole really delivers. "It was definitely a tough sell in the beginning, because it's not an easy task," Barlog admits. "Even at the end of this everybody was looking at me saying, 'We've put a *lot* of work into this. We hope it's worth it'. Then they play the game, because a lot of developers are just so heads-down they haven't been able to play it until now, and everyone comes back and says, 'It's unbelievable. I never would have expected it to matter as much as it does, but it really does'. People say, 'I didn't even think about it, but at the end I realised'. It really makes a difference. It makes you feel like you're never taken out. None of the vocabulary of the camera is forcing you to do something or making you present or aware of it being an experience being told to you. You feel like you're Kratos."

The effect, then, is not dissimilar from how a single shot take in a film will add some unseen tension to a scene, but getting it done in live action takes insane levels of planning and choreography, not to mention nailing every line of dialogue, so we wondered what the challenges were for Santa Monica Studio. "I think the challenges are very similar to the film environment, but our trick is that everything does have to link up and the player is in control of certain things, so we have the variability of these events triggering in places that we don't expect," considers Barlog. "We have to figure out how to get them from where we didn't expect to where we are expecting."

And there are all of the cutscenes to consider too, the first of which Barlog recalled for us. "The first time we went on the stage to shoot, we shot a four-minute scene that had two height changes. We had to build a small set that had tons of different points that we had to touch. The actors had to then pick up objects, go upstairs, and I think we had five actors and this was the first one we had done. I was totally blinding myself saying, 'Whatever man, it's going to be amazing and we can do this'. I hadn't really processed it completely about how difficult it was going to be until we got onto the set and really did the first take, and I realised it's like a four-and-a-half minute single take with a nine-year-old actor trying to remember his lines, and all of the really complex blocking as well as the camera guy, Dori Arazi, the cinematographer who was running around in between them and trying to get different shots."

But clearly with time the team has managed to bring all of these pieces together. The combination of the single-take stream of viewpoint and the tight camera, along with the performances of Christopher Judge as Kratos and Sunny Suljic as Atreus, is coalescing to give *God Of War* exactly the kind of dramatic weight, along with its mechanical prowess that Barlog had been looking for. Striking that balance is everything he wanted to achieve with the game when he returned to Sony.

"I'M ONE OF THOSE NEUROTIC JUMP BUTTON HITTERS, JUST RUNNING THROUGH A GAME JUMPING"

"Every game that I play, if there's not a strong 'why' driving me through the game, like 'There's just great mechanics and it's really fun and you can do all of these cool things', that's great, but after a couple of hours if I don't have a 'why', if I'm not in there for a reason, if I'm not being driven by something that I care about then I feel like I just lose interest," he tells us. "It may just be me and a small subset of people, but I feel that the games that I'm seeing becoming popular today, the 'why' is driving a lot of people and the 'why' is human drama. I think that while it's personal for me, it's personal in the sense that I'm pulling things from my own life in order to make the drama feel more real, but it is far more of a universal human interaction thing, as opposed to being placed in any kind of time period. It's not like Kratos and Atreus are going to talk about the proper Twitter etiquette or anything like that."

Having spent some time with the game now, we have felt the 'why' emerging from the game and enjoyed the fresh take on the classic God Of War approach to combat and action. Now, all that remains is for everyone else to see that for themselves when the game launches on 20 April 2018. It may not be the God Of War of old, it may not have the blades and it may not thumb its nose at authority like it once did, but this new take on Kratos replaces all of those elements with something just as compelling. As Barlog concludes, "The reality is people just need to play it and realise that it's a different feel, but the DNA of what this franchise is is still there."

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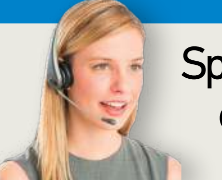
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HOW INDIE DEVS FINISHED HALF

WE SPEAK TO THE MANY CREATORS AND ORIGINATOR OF THE EPISTLE 3 JAM ABOUT HOW THEY INTERPRETED THE FINAL CHAPTER OF VALVE'S MAGNUM OPUS

"THERE'S SOMETHING FASCINATING ABOUT TAKING THIS THING THAT WILL NEVER BE MADE AND LETTING IT GO FREE," SAYS BRENDON CHUNG, CREATOR OF *TIGER TEAM*, A GAME INSPIRED BY A PIECE OF WRITING WE NEVER THOUGHT WE WOULD GET TO SEE.

On 25 August 2017, Marc Laidlaw, former writer on the Half-Life series with Valve – from the original game to its extended second chapter – posted a short story in the form of a letter entitled Epistle 3. While the names had been gender-swapped and other details disguised, it was clear that this was an interpretation of *Half-Life 2: Episode 3*, or *Half-Life 3* as we have come to refer to it over the years. It was a concluding chapter in the story of Gordon Freeman (who refers to herself as Gertie Fremont in the text), a story that was never given a chance to be finished.

It was an extraordinary moment. After so many years of looking for clues and references to a Half-Life sequel, of seeing the number three in any Valve or Valve-associated title as a portent of Freeman's return, we finally had this. A vision of what could have been.

A vision that Laura Michet didn't want to see go to waste. "I saw someone tweeting it out and I was immediately fascinated," the originator of the Epistle 3 Jam on itch.io explains to us. "That evening, at dinner with some friends, I ended up reading parts of it with them. We were all people who had grown up with the Half-Life games and started games careers in the shadow of the perpetually unreleased *HL3*." And when the dinner was over and the enormity of what Laidlaw's text represented settled into place, she sprang into action. "I rushed back to my computer to make the jam, actually."

Game jams are a curious and wonderful thing. They are cauldrons of creativity in compromised conditions. Limits of time, resources and accessibility make them the open mic nights of the games industry, where veterans can play with new materials and up and coming creatives can make a name for themselves and show their talent. "They're my favourite creative activity in the world, pretty much," says Michet, who started out in the game jam scene after graduating a few years ago. "I love running game jams on itch, too, since that platform gives you instant access to other people who might be interested in the same topic. I love seeing the stuff that comes out of itch jams."

> "THE STAKES IN A JAM ARE SUPER LOW BECAUSE EVERYONE COMES INTO THE PROJECT EXPECTING THEY'RE GOING TO FAIL"
> **LAURA MICHET**

The Epistle 3 Jam started on 26 August (the day after Laidlaw's piece was revealed) and ran to 1 November, attracting a swathe of developers with the desire to finish what Valve had started. Developers such as the aforementioned Brendon Chung, creator of *Thirty Flights Of Loving* and *Quadrilateral Cowboy*. "I was (and still am) a tremendous fan of the Half-Life games. They really blew up the definition of what a first-person shooter can be. Half-Life played a big part in shaping the kind of work I do," he tells us. "There's some really elaborate and ambitious stuff happening in the synopsis. Lots of great temporal and dimensional hopping. I wanted to use this aspect as the backbone of the project, to have you and your memories bumping around time and space."

"It's a beautiful, poignant farewell to a series that will never reach a proper conclusion." Heather Robertson, creator of GENDERWRECKED and, for this game, the psychedelic *EPISTLE 3*, tells us. "Also, in the wrong hands, it is a ridiculous comedy piece where nothing makes sense and everything is horrible. I have those wrong hands."

And pretty much everyone we spoke to concurred that the prospect of creating a bootleg Half-Life was just too good an opportunity to pass up. How the developers chose to take it from there and what they created was wildly different, however. Of the 32 submissions to the jam once the process had closed, very few are actually first-person shooters or, even if they are, not in the traditional sense. Thanks to the nature of the jam and the source material, the creators felt a freedom to go wild.

"Evidently, not even Valve wants to take on the challenge of making a shooter follow-up to *Half-Life 2*, so I felt there was zero mileage in us attempting it –



instead, a game focusing on relationships or dialogue seemed the most entertaining direction – especially playing with Freeman's role as a silent, killing machine who's always washed along by events," says James Kapella, one third of TEK Collective, behind *HL2: Episode 3 - Gordon Freeman: Rational Man*. Others had a much simpler mission statement. "I wanted to make the biggest, dumbest piece of garbage possible. I'd like to think I succeeded," Robertson declares enthusiastically about her first-person fever dream of an experience that pretty much every other developer we spoke to praised for its design and ingenuity.

"I aimed for a literal interpretation of the most cynical take on the linear FPS genre," Dave Hoffman, AKA Dave Makes, tells us. "That is, walking down a hallway, killing everything, occasionally pausing while people talk at you. I'm not actually as cynical as all that, even as a joke, so I couldn't help getting sentimental while writing the dialogue." The result was something like a merging of Fruit Ninja with a relationship simulator called *THE THIRD ONE*.

In fact many of the developers looked to find the funnier side of the story, leaning on the absurdity of it all while also being reverential to their inspiration. "For a while I'd been wanting to make a game that was just a single joke, setup and punchline, communicated through gameplay instead of writing," Nicholas Kornek, maker of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Freeman*, explains. "I actually came up with the title before figuring out what the game would be. I just knew that I really wanted to make something about Gordon Freeman's strange inability to »

speak to anyone. In the end, I decided to make a game that would reflect on the futility of trying to communicate when your only impact on the world is through violence, but, you know, funny and stuff."

And while the text of Laidlaw's script gave these creators a lot of freedom to be inventive, the jam process enhanced it too. "The stakes in a jam are super low because everyone comes into the project expecting they're going to fail," says Michet. "I ended up just making a bizarre interactive short story where you make only one real choice – whether or not to shoot the BreenGrub. The game keeps track of whether or not you killed him, and it also keeps track of how many people have killed him since the game has been running."

In actual fact what Michet made has been described by some of the other developers as a Twine MMO, as the text-based story actually involved measuring the number of people making the choice to kill or save Laidlaw's depiction of a Dr. Breen-like grub and challenges you to shift the numbers (similar in concept, but more complex in execution, to the Lutece twins coin toss scene from *Bioshock Infinite*).

"I think Twine is very much mischaracterised by both game fans and indie game developers," Michet adds. "It has a very low barrier of entry, but a very high skill ceiling for people who want to use it as a complex expressive tool. Hypertext itself – telling stories using clickable links – is a kind of interactive fiction sub-discipline that nobody has quite yet mastered, I think. The possibilities of hypertext are pretty immense."

Everyone's approach in the jam was different, from sifting through old concepts to coming up with something original, using the longer jam schedule to play with a work in progress or come up with a new system altogether. It was a personal journey for everyone we spoke to.



HL: Minimal Edition started out with pixel art characters only as a placeholder before 3D assets could be added to the game. Its developer, however, found them so charming that it was decided the pixel art enemies and crowbar should remain.



The strange abstract imagery of Heather Robertson's *EPISTLE 3* is really quite something. There's a speed run of the game that takes about a minute, but we would recommend reading the text as it's fantastically composed.

"IT'S A BEAUTIFUL, POIGNANT FAREWELL TO A SERIES THAT WILL NEVER REACH A PROPER CONCLUSION"
HEATHER ROBERTSON

"To be honest, I jumped into this jam with very little thought. I had been following Heather Robertson's work in progress and it made me laugh so hard I couldn't help but join in the fun," Dave Makes tells us, for example. "It's funny, *THE THIRD ONE* is probably my most personal game to date. The art style is just my rough doodles, they're the kind of thing I fill notebooks with when I'm having fun."

"I had already written a bunch of top-down game code for a game pitch I was working on and it came to me that I should make a Lego Star Wars-type game where everything is a caricature of the Half-Life universe," says Owen Deery, creator of *Small Radios Big Televisions* who made a kind of chibi-shooter called *Expo. Decay.* "I figured I was already making an unauthorised Half-Life game, so I had nothing to lose by re-using Valve's assets. This sped up the production process a ton since any time I needed a new asset I could probably find it in the Half-Life archives. More importantly, though, it really helped the game feel like a Half-Life game. When you kill a Combine soldier and his radio plays that flatline noise it really makes a huge difference."

Brendon Chung also delved back into the real games to fish out some authenticity for his homage. "It was a lot of fun taking the dialogue lines from *Half-Life 2* and re-using them in a different context to create new scenes," he reveals. "I basically listened to every line of dialogue in *Half-Life 2* and 'wrote' my script around the suitable lines."

The strange array of different approaches, the sense of humour, the irreverence of it all, based around a franchise that is so revered and praised for its narrative is an interesting thing, but something we imagine those at Valve would approve of. The love of Half-Life is so clear from these titles and the sympathy the developers feel for the creators was apparent.

"I've worked on games that have been cancelled, or suspended indefinitely, and it's heartbreaking," says Dave Makes. "*THE THIRD ONE* is a goofy, silly thing, but underneath that, it's a love letter to game developers who have felt that heartbreak."

"I was also very pleased that most people didn't just dunk on the *HL3* developers or make a lot of angry games," adds Michet. "It's worse that the *HL3* devs didn't get to make their game than it is that we didn't get to play it. Working on a project and watching it get cancelled or die sucks – that's happened to me a lot in my professional career."

So, while the Epistle 3 Jam may not have delivered much by way of an authentic conclusion to the Half-Life story, what it has inspired is a wide variety of fun and experimental games as well as a fantastic platform for a number of developers, some of whom only work on games part-time, to find exposure and have their creativity appreciated. And while many said they wouldn't be coming back to these titles now the jam was done, some will be looking to build on what they created here.

"I want to play a little more with the world of Half-Life, rethink the barnacles, return the Vortigaunts as enemies. Make something crazy with it," says Alexey Sigh, maker of *HL: Minimal Edition*, which mixes 3D world design with pixel art characters. "It's simply fun to come up with something new using known characters and express your own vision. Also, I treated this project as a practice at level and game design because its minimal visuals allowed me to spend less time on assets and more on the gameplay experience."

Deery also had an eye to the future with his creation. "I used the jam as a jumping off point to experiment and prototype my next project, which has similar mechanics, and this allowed me to take all the feedback I received from the jam and use it to improve the experience. I had to remove all the Half-Life assets obviously, but it feels like the same game in spirit," he tells us.

"I am a firm believer in the idea that a game is like a little bird. Once it flies from the nest it grows wings and a beak, and would try to kill me if I got close," Robertson tells us with an alternate view on things. "There are birds worth tracking down and binding so they would not peck me, but this bird deserves to be free. Also it has massive talons and a gun. Why did I give it a gun?"

"More than anything I'm really happy that a lot of people seem to be enjoying the game," is Kornek's take on the experience. "I've seen a lot of playthroughs of it on YouTube and the joke seems to land well for pretty much everyone, which makes me feel like I did a solid job on the design." While Dave Makes just had a lot of fun with the development process, as he explains to us. "I had an absolute blast recording all the sound effects. My wife was trying to study while I was banging on things around the apartment, slamming a head of cabbage against the floor, obnoxiously chomping on carrots, swinging a big stick around for that crowbar 'swoosh' noise… and then I made her do head crab screeches with me. It was fun."

A jam is about giving game developers the spark of an idea that will send them forward. Sometimes that's the one thing missing between talent and execution. Besides, thanks to Laidlaw's writing and Michet getting the game jam running as quickly as she did, we now have all of these games and all of these interpretations of the Half-Life world to enjoy. Michet herself seems delighted with the response. "I was overwhelmed! The outcome was better than I could have hoped. A lot of people interpreted the jam in a wide variety of strange, incongruous and hilarious ways and that is absolutely the best outcome," she enthuses. "There were a ton of extremely funny, weird games in this jam, which was also amazing – I love how jams let people make the kind of outrageous joke-games they otherwise wouldn't ever be able to make."

"IT'S WORSE THAT THE HL3 DEVS DIDN'T GET TO MAKE THEIR GAME THAN IT IS THAT WE DIDN'T GET TO PLAY IT"
LAURA MICHET

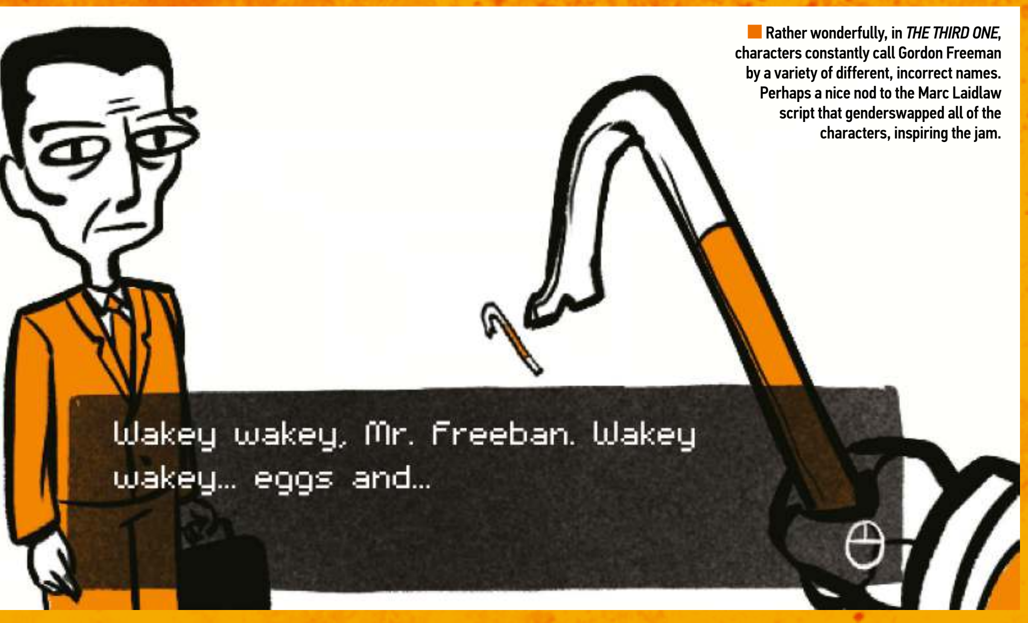
And so, while it feels more and more like we might never see Valve finish its saga, at least developers like these are tending the flame of Gordon Freeman, keeping the dream alive and giving us experiences that even a team as creative as the Bellevue outfit would balk at attempting.

"A jam is a great opportunity to capture a moment, either in your own development (technical or personal), or something external," Kapella sums up for us. "Marc Laidlaw sharing Epistle 3 was both a stimulating gift to the community and a full stop the series was lacking - and this was our modest tribute. Half-Life belongs to the people now!"

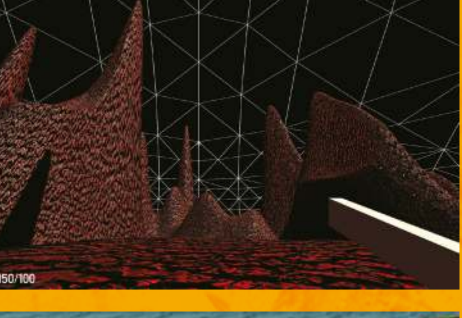


WHAT DID EPISTLE 3 REVEAL?

A CLOSER EXAMINATION OF MARC LAIDLAW'S BOOTLEG HALF-LIFE STORY



Rather wonderfully, in *THE THIRD ONE*, characters constantly call Gordon Freeman by a variety of different, incorrect names. Perhaps a nice nod to the Marc Laidlaw script that genderswapped all of the characters, inspiring the jam.











The lighting in *Expo. Decay* is very nicely done, managing to evoke the atmosphere of the original Half-Life titles even though the character models have been heavily stylised for a Lego-inspired gameplay feel.

WHERE HAS GORDON BEEN?

Lost in other dimensions, unable to respond to our calls. Or rather, Marc Laidlaw has been busy working on other projects and now, more than 18 months since it was announced he was leaving Valve, he's been able to pen a letter from Dr. Freema... we mean Gertie Fremont.

DID THEY FIND THE BOREALIS?

Indeed, but not without some trouble. It turns out that the location discovered in Episode Two was not so much definitive coordinates for the ship's placement, but its likely re-entry point after flitting in and out of time and space.

WHAT WAS THE CONNECTION TO PORTAL?

It's all about travelling between spaces, as it's one of Aperture Science's greatest interests. The Borealis was equipped with a Bootstrap Device that was supposed to allow it to travel inside a generated field from anywhere to anywhere instantaneously. However, when it was activated prematurely to keep it out of Combine hands, it turns out it also travels to any place and time as well. The ship is therefore stretched between its starting location and Arctic destination through time and space.

DO THEY FIND JUDITH MOSSMAN?

Yes, Dr. Mossman helps Gordon and Alyx aboard the ship having pleaded her case as a double agent working with the Resistance against the Combine. Alyx still blames her for her father's death, however.

DO THEY DESTROY THE BOREALIS?

It was a matter of great debate whether they should or shouldn't, but Alyx, determined to carry out her father's dying wishes, insists the ship must be destroyed. When Dr. Mossman threatens to shoot them and rematerialise the ship in the Arctic for the Resistance forces to retrieve, Alyx shoots her and decides with Freeman to use the ship as a missile by crashing it into a Combine staging area that they keep seeing as the ship flickers in space.

DID G-MAN'S PLAN FOR ALYX GET REVEALED?

Yes, having suggested to Gordon that he had plans for Alyx, he turns up just in time to grab her from the Borealis before she and Freeman send the ship hurtling into a Combine invasion force. Gordon Freeman is left alone contemplating the futility of this plan as the enormity of the challenge becomes clearer through the bridge windows.

ANY SURPRISES?

The BreenGrub! It turns out the Combine retained some portion of Breen's consciousness from before he was killed and transplanted it into a grub creature, now seemingly in command of Combine forces in the Arctic. However, the BreenGrub is terrified of Freeman and ultimately begs to be killed, ending its miserable existence. Alyx refuses to help and Gordon's choice remains ambiguous in the text.

HOW DOES IT END?

Gordon Freeman is saved from the crashing ship by the Vortigaunts just in time, but has apparently been returned to Earth at a much later date. He speaks of the terrain having changed and people not recognising him anymore, but the Resistance lives on. He signs off, saying he leaves it to us to finish the story as this is his final correspondence.

THE GAMES IN

WHAT EACH CREATOR MADE AND HOW THEY MADE IT



TIGER TEAM

BRENDON CHUNG

One of the most faithful takes on the original Epistle 3 piece, it was built in the Source engine, which is probably where some of that authenticity came from. Thanks to its use of sound files from the original games, it has plenty of voice acting in it, as well as all the character models and environments you could hope for.





THE GRUB

LAURA MICHET

This text-based MMO was built with Twine 1.4.2 with some back-end server code support provided by Bennett Sala. This code counts how many players had particular choices through the game and then feeds that back into the conclusion for players. It focuses on the BreenGrub with some fantastic, Douglas Adams-esque writing.

Her refusal strikes you as odd because *you are very very certain that Alyx has shot someone in the near future, or will shoot someone in the recent past. Someone you* know. *She's going to shoot someone and it's a bad idea, she shouldn't do it—*

"I won't shoot you," she repeats. "I'm not granting you that mercy."

There's a rumble down below. A soft blurring of people and things. Soot stains crawl up the walls and then recede. Another gust of displaced time.

—you are very very certain that Alyx is going to kill someone you know and she



THE THIRD ONE

DAVE MAKES

Created using a mixture of tools such as Game Maker Studio, Photoshop, Ableton Live, Audacity and GitHub, *THE THIRD ONE* is a pure distillation of first-person gameplay interspersed with conversations, albeit with its tongue firmly in its cheek. The gameplay is a simple swiping motion with your mouse.





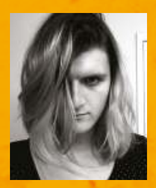


HL: MINIMAL EDITION

ALEXEY SIGH

Using Unity as its engine with 3D models and levels built in ProBuilder and pixel art made in Aseprite, *HL: Minimal Edition* is a first-person melee combat game with some fun platforming and nicely animated head crab action. The mixture of 3D and pixel styles works rather nicely and was born of placeholder art that Sigh grew to like.





EPISTLE 3

HEATHER ROBERTSON

Built in Unity (and only worked on after midnight by Robertson) EPISTLE 3 is a surreal and abstract take on the concepts from Laidlaw's script, but wonderfully captures the experience of Freeman as he feels out of sync and lost in time and space as he travels on the Borealis, reflecting on decisions made and what will come to pass in the future.







EXPO. DECAY

OWEN DEERY

Deery builds his own engines for his games based on C++ and OpenGL. This is due to a passion for technology creation and code control. The result is an isometric shooter with 'big-head' interpretations of Gordon Freeman, Alyx Vance and the Combine soldiers. The action is fast paced and the sound effects are spot on (as they're straight from *Half-Life 2*).



HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 3 - GORDON FREEMAN: RATIONAL MAN

TEK COLLECTIVE

The TEK Collective are James Kapella on code and words, Theo Jones on art and Edward Swain on music and sounds. They used Game Maker Studio 2 in addition to Flash for the art and Ableton, Logic and synths for the audio. The final result is a visual novel that places Freeman as a bit of an arsehole now that he's finally found his voice.

I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST FREEMAN

NICHOLAS KORNEK

With textures from Substance Painter, 3D modelling from Blender and running on the Unity engine, Nicholas Kornek's game is a wonderful mix of fantastic detail and cartoonish design that explores the futility of Freeman's only means of expression being through the violent acts he has to commit. But funny, of course.



"YOU'RE LITERALLY PLOPPED IN FRONT OF A CORKBOARD AND ARE LEFT TO PIN UP AND REARRANGE CODEWORDS"

THE PINNACLE OF WORLD POWER

REVISITING THE COLD WAR FROM A POLISH PERSPECTIVE, PHANTOM DOCTRINE UNITES THE WORLD AGAINST A HIGHER POWER

A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE IS OFTEN HEALTHY. WE LOOK ON OTHERS THROUGH OUR OWN EYES, NOT TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THEIR EXPERIENCE. We judge those we aren't fans of by the standards of those we are. We look at history through a predefined lens – one which doesn't take into account the experiences that millions of others have had in other parts of the world. *Phantom Doctrine* isn't a game aiming to change the very notion of how the West sees the Cold War, but coming from a Polish developer, it's always going to have an underlying *difference* to the end product.

Paweł Kroenke, narrative designer on *Phantom Doctrine*, makes it clear the turn-based strategy title's USP isn't just 'made from a different perspective'. "We didn't aim for, 'Okay, let's make the Cold War, Eastern-style'," he says, "This is a game about operating independently, as the player, so your organisation is not tied to any political identity – or to any ideology, in fact. You're fighting a *global* conspiracy, one so big it transcends national borders." *Phantom Doctrine* doesn't throw the player into a fight between East and West like might be expected. "It's a fight about spies, who are not nice guys, against a global conspiracy, backed by even less nice guys. It's really vague, and post-modern maybe." »

At the same time, the simple fact is *Phantom Doctrine* comes from a Polish studio, from a team made up of mostly Polish nationals, and it wasn't too long ago that Poland was on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Kroenke admits this unique perspective is sure to have had some impact on the game: "Because most of the guys on the team are Polish, and most of the guys lived in the Communist era, they all have old history and stories in the family – and those stories are about what people didn't like," he explains, "But it still has a tint of this Eastern perspective on the whole thing. It's maybe not the main focus, but I still think you will see something that we just wouldn't think about because we haven't lived in the West. At the same time, I think it will be viewed by the Western player, because it will be 'weird', as 'this is unusual, this is not how things work here'."

That change in perspective is sure to get more eyes on *Phantom Doctrine* than it might otherwise have achieved. While CreativeForge Games did achieve modest success with its previous turn-based strategy game, *Hard West*, that certainly wasn't enough to whip players into a frenzy about what was coming next from the studio. Fortunately, *Phantom Doctrine* is positioning itself as something just different enough to catch players' attention, while at the same time mixing in a bunch of familiar aspects – familiar to those who played *Hard West*, and certainly familiar to fans of the XCOM series.

It's the comparison with the Firaxis greats that brings up another inspiration from CreativeForge's original idea in the shape of *The X-Files*. "The first page of our design doc on the game includes the words 'X-Files' as one of the main inspirations, and to be perfectly honest, that wouldn't be my first choice," Kroenke laughs.

"PHANTOM DOCTRINE CAN BE COMPARED TO XCOM AND THE X-FILES, DEALING AS IT DOES WITH GLOBAL CONSPIRACY"

"When *X-Files* was on TV, I was nine, maybe, and even then, to me it was completely ridiculous. Sometimes it was climactic and spooky and stuff, but a lot of the time it was pretty absurd. Especially the alien-based episodes and stuff.

"So when they told me, 'We're going to make this *X-Files* game', I was kind of like, 'I'm not sure what we're going to do – aliens?'" he continues. "And they're like, 'Well, no, no aliens, because we want this to be a serious game.' 'Okay, so what do we do, like the Bigfoot and all the legends… like telepathy, some paranormal stuff?' 'No, we actually want it to be realistic, so none of this.' 'Okay, so what are we looking at?' 'Like government conspiracy'. This is what the original appeal of the *X-Files* was for most people."

All of this means *Phantom Doctrine* is still something that can be compared fairly to XCOM, dealing as it does with global conspiracy – and of course turn-based strategy – but the well being drawn from went a bit deeper than just emulating the best in the genre. "We went from this, and we looked for other references that were more of a fit for the era that we selected for the game: the early Eighties," Kroenke says. "That was helpful as it gave us more inspiration, a wider array of things to pull from. We went into those spy movies and all kinds of spy fiction. But because this was supposed to be realistic and serious, we didn't go for James Bond, who was like bigger-than-life and over the top."

Instead, the team veered more in the direction of the 'stale beer' wing of spy fiction



There's a lot of impetus put on infiltration throughout *Phantom Doctrine*, and you'll want to sharpen your stealth skills before jumping in.

Visually, the game has two distinct regions: East and West. More specific differentiations might become apparent in the finished version, but CreativeForge only has so much capacity.



Darkness is a key theme in *Phantom Doctrine*, with your agents operating in the shadows as they do. It literally never gets light.

Phantom Doctrine's XCOM influences are worn on its sleeve, but after a short time it becomes clear this is very much its own game, with its own unique systems.



What would an international spy organisation be without the ability to brainwash enemy agents? Nothing, that's what. Fortunately, *Phantom Doctrine* lets you do that and more.



– your trenchcoats and realistic cases, John le Carré and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, anything that errs more on the side of gritty, sombre reality. "We felt that this fits the game very well," Kroenke says. "And this is an environment where we can build the conspiracy, and just see how far it takes us."

All these words count for nothing, of course, if the game itself doesn't live up to the plans. Fortunately, the team at CreativeForge, which has "basically doubled" in size since *Hard West*, has nailed the atmosphere. Players are met with distinct, differing mechanics in and outside of missions, with the pre-mission time spent piecing together clues in order to pick up new leads, sending agents around the world to gather intelligence and, rather brilliantly, engaging in a robust psy-ops campaign if your base currently holds any captured enemy agents.

This latter element allows a number of different approaches, with the one we employed being a straightforward brainwashing attempt. If successful, the enemy agent is reprogrammed to respond to a trigger from your agents in the field before being released back into the welcoming arms of their original agency. Encounter this agent again in a mission and you can use them as an additional unit on the ground; an agent beginning behind enemy lines, quite literally with back door access to objectives. Of course, this sort of reprogramming can backfire and be used against your own agents – it's not just a cheat button in disguise – but it's a devious delight to turn an enemy against their own people with absolutely no warning.

The aforementioned gathering of leads is another area in which *Phantom Doctrine* nails its stale beer influences – you're literally plopped in front of a corkboard and are left to pin up and rearrange codewords, photos, information and more, stringing them together to form cohesive links and actionable intel. On the one hand, it can be a bit pernickety, demanding that every precise link between specific clues is found before information is unlocked. However, all of that staring at a screen, moving pictures and string and pins around… it's just *spot on*. At least to what we think being a Cold War spy would be like. Not that we'd know. Ahem.

Moving into missions, any player of *Hard West* or XCOM will be right at home from the start. Players are dropped into the fray not with guns blazing or combat gear shimmering in the rain, but quietly, and donned in casual slacks – this is infiltration; cloak and dagger deception, not compartmentalised war. Areas are marked as freely accessible or restricted, and it's up to the player to approach situations however they see fit with their team of (secretly) kitted out agents. As a quick example, we opted to use our off-site sniper – silenced and with a multi-turn cooldown between shots – to eliminate one problematic guard, before successfully disarming alarm systems, activating a brainwashed enemy agent, infiltrating the enemy installation in disguise and exfiltrating without ever being seen or having to harm another person.

Other approaches are available, of course, and it's equally valid to go into things weapons hot, tackling your opposition in a hail of bullets and neck-snaps from the shadows. Technically you can go in all guns blazing too, if you want, but *Phantom Doctrine* isn't a game that takes it easy on you. Any attempt to overwhelm the much more well-equipped enemy force, mainly comprising soldiers, didn't go down too well. Basically, there's choice in the game, but it's all framed from the perspective that you're striking from the shadows. You're a team of spies, not the world's greatest supersoldiers. Unless you engage in some hardcore body engineering, of course, which results in faster, smarter, stronger agents – but generally speaking, they're just normal people with honed skills.

If it all feels a bit similar to the direction the studio was taking with *Hard West*, you'd be bang on – this is a learning process for the growing Polish team, and its Warsaw base of operations is growing both in staff and confidence with each passing week. "This is sort of a continuation of »

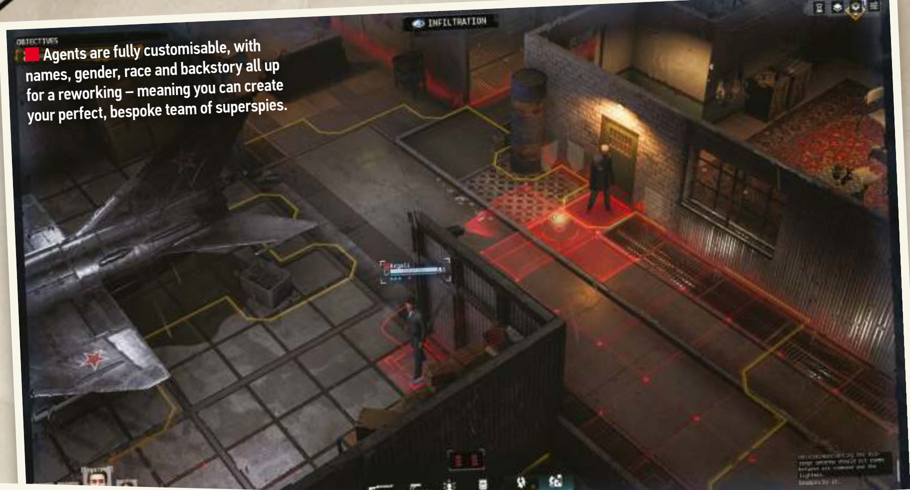
GROWING PAINS

FREEDOM ISN'T FREE (TIME)

As CreativeForge grows, so does its responsibility. Not just to players, but to staff. While you might expect an independent studio to be living the life of Riley, with hardly a care in the world, Kroenke is very serious when it comes to the bosses making sure that things are well-managed.

"When you hire like 20 people and they rely on you as a company owner," he says, "to give them money, to get some food in their stomachs, you kind of get respectful of their time and of their money and of everything you get. You try to make the best goals from when you start. And this is something that you can do every time, and sometimes you need to just experiment."

But the studio *is* able to enjoy luxuries that some in larger studios might not: time to think, to plan, to rethink and replan. "Kacper [Szymczak], the lead designer, believes in thinking things through first," Kroenke explains. "He believes that designers are paid to think, so that's what they should be focusing on. Before we implement some features, we tend to spend a lot of time just thinking it through, thinking over, and while it paid off in *Hard West*, this time it's been more relaxed. But this ethos remains and I believe that we could exploit this more comfortable situation to develop more and better features overall."


Agents are fully customisable, with names, gender, race and backstory all up for a reworking – meaning you can create your perfect, bespoke team of superspies.


Environments are very much recognisable, leading to a bizarre situation like this where you're in a car park… but it's actually interesting. Weird.

what the company was doing with *Hard West*," Kroenke says. "It was also a turn-based technical game, and it was very small, but it was very restrained. When we finished *Hard West*, we felt that we had so much more to add to the genre, and we had many more ideas that we wanted to try out. We also felt like we need to make another step up in terms of quality and polish, so *Phantom Doctrine* has a bigger budget, and we used all the experience we got making *Hard West* in this game in order to make it the best we can do, basically."

That experience going into the game means a deeper, more robust set of RPG-like systems and a smarter, more complex overall system behind everything. It also means no more westerns for the time being, as most of those in the studio haven't been able to even watch a movie featuring cowboys since completing work on *Hard West*. At the same time, though, the setting of *Phantom Doctrine* wasn't taken lightly. "We had a bunch of proposals in terms of what we could do with setting," Kroenke explains. "Setting is actually a big thing for a company, because we believe that if we make an original setting with a cool twist and something that we haven't seen much before, it's going to add value to the product.

"This proved to be true with *Hard West*, where people said the whole atmosphere of the game was probably one of the biggest assets. We definitely wanted to capitalise on that with *Phantom Doctrine*." The decision to turn to the Cold War came about because of its seemingly obvious marriage with a turn-based strategic setting – and the chance to send a group of agents on missions around the world was one CreativeForge couldn't pass up on. Oh, plus the whole 'real life' thing to link it to, of course. "There are so many cool stories told in movies and books and in real life about the Cold War," Kroenke says, "that we could exploit to create an experience that hasn't been done before."

The increase in scope and ambition isn't something Kroenke or the rest of the team is downplaying, either – this is a team that's very proud of how it is growing and increasing and improving. "Everywhere you look, it has more stuff than *Hard West* had," Kroenke says. "This feels like a legitimate production. The other title was an indie title, and we basically had to scrounge every penny on *Hard West* just to release the game. Here we could allow some experimentation and some iteration." Of course, it's not all plain sailing, and early versions of *Phantom Doctrine* were scrapped for being "disastrous", requiring players to juggle way too many elements at the same time. But it's all a learning process.

"We made a prototype," Kroenke says. "And then we had to again and again, just make it usable. Maybe it was *fine*, but to just make it work, to get a bit of sophistication and streamlining." Previously, the team would have just cut a feature rather than spending time – and money – on trying to perfect it. This time around there are far fewer limits imposed, thanks to an improved financial situation and a bit more

LOOKING BEYOND THE WALL

LIKE, LITERALLY JUST LOOKING



The world on one side of the Iron Curtain had - and has - a distinct look from that on the other. Look back at any Cold War photography or film you can find and you'll see differences - the cars, the streets, the signs. While still a small studio, CreativeForge thought it important enough to clearly define differences and, while it might not impact on how you actually play *Phantom Doctrine*, you will know (roughly) where you are in the world.

Kroenke points out he was initially worried that the art department wouldn't be on board with the extra work, but they knocked it out of the park based on plentiful treatments and mood boards that he provided. This influenced the direction of how the art department approached the actual creation of assets, and the finished product ended up with two major visual styles: eastern and western.

"Levels on the Western hemisphere have different lighting than the Eastern ones do," Kroenke explains. "The assets look completely different. You have cars that will look different, all the signs are in different languages, so you will get a lot of Russian letters on the Eastern side, like in the Eastern bloc, while the Western bloc will have most in English or in different languages. The lighting is different, the mood is different, the architecture is different on both sides. There are definitely tons of consequences for the art department that came from a simple decision!"



If you want to run in, guns blazing, you can do just that and the game will cater to you. Unless you're well equipped, though, it'll probably all go wrong.

time to get everything right. "For *Phantom Doctrine* we've had several versions, and have just make them more polished and better-designed overall, because we had these completely comfortable conditions of having more people on board and more time and more money just to try out new things."

This experimental, iterative approach to development shows, with *Phantom Doctrine* offering layers on layers to pick through as a player and help customise their experience. There's even the promise of three distinct campaigns, with the third only unlocking after one of the first two have been completed. That third campaign will be more than just an optional, hidden extra, instead offering a concrete, defining narrative to get stuck into. And, of course, it's not just the storyline as a whole that the devs want players to come back to; the in-game events are robust enough to see some deep changes as you play, and the strategy aims to be deep enough that even experts will be kept on their toes. We definitely felt a pang of the classic *Police Quest: SWAT 2* while playing.

One area you might not consider when it comes to a growing studio is just how to manage a project of a size you've not handled before. As Kroenke points out, it's not all been plain sailing so far. "One of the tenets of the company is that the three major departments: art, design and coding work *not exactly* separately, but they're managed separately," he says. "It's not like a designer can tell an artist what to do. The task has to come from the art management. This kind of prevents great synergy and a very close co-operation, because that would require us to increase responsibilities, and gets kind of messy in a bigger picture."

"PHANTOM DOCTRINE WILL DO A GOOD JOB OF SHOWING US A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON WORLD HISTORY"

While the studio might be growing beyond its 'a few people in a room' indie roots, there is still plenty of co-operation throughout the single-floor office on the outskirts of the city. "The story and the game design are very close," Kroenke says. "When I was tackling the story almost on my own, I also did a lot of game design for the production. We have a very close connection between game mechanics and the story. A lot of the story progressed through regular game mechanics, and some of it is scripted, but it uses a lot of regular systems." And there was one area in which everyone was on the same page almost from day one: *Phantom Doctrine* is a dark game, both in setting and mood. "It's not cheerful at all," Kroenke laughs.

"It has some jokes, but it's not like it's the most lighthearted set of characters," he explains. "The stuff you do is serious, and the problems you face are serious, and the extent of these 12 conspiracies you're up against… it's kind of numbing, in a way. When you're faced with an enemy who is decentralised. They don't have a big leader; they don't have a single base of operations; they're everywhere, basically. You kind of discover their end game, their main plot, and you can dismantle this whole plot, you can stop it… but you're *far* from defeating the whole conspiracy." To know it's still there, that the conspiratorial group will try again – this is the world you're a part of in *Phantom Doctrine*. It's dark, it's tough and it's not exactly riddled with hope. In short, it seems very much a product of the world beyond the Iron Curtain.

It's not a game *about* the Cold War, but *Phantom Doctrine* stands out both as one set *during* the tumultuous time and as one made *by* a studio located in what was once a hotbed of intrigue beyond the West's reach. It's not going to directly challenge the Established Normal in gaming, which tends towards a US-centric worldview and understanding of events, but *Phantom Doctrine* will do a good job of showing us a different perspective on world history. More than that, it will show us the growth of a promising studio and an addition to the strategy genre that brings with it some fine ideas. We guarantee we're not trying to brainwash you on that.

It's the late 19th century, and the undead have taken root in the sweltering bayou of Louisiana. Lurking somewhere amid the cypress trees and dilapidated shacks is a monster that would make John Carpenter proud – huge, tough and deadly. But this fearsome predator is about to become your prey. You're a professional hunter for hire, and killing this creature will earn you and your hunting partner a substantial reward – provided you can survive long enough to get out of the swamp, that is.

Unfortunately, you don't know where the monster is, and you're not the only person seeking out the prize; other groups of Hunters roam the swamp. You don't know where they are either, or even how many are out there. All you know for sure is that this isn't a team effort. If the other Hunters see you, they'll kill you, regardless of whether you're wading through the marsh, battling zombies or even squaring off against the main target. If you happen to have already killed the creature, they'll prise the trophy from your cold, dead hands.

Tension is at the heart of *Hunt: Showdown*. Every distant gunshot, every blind corner, every startled murder of crows has the potential to send all your hard work crumbling into nothing. "It's high-risk, high-reward gameplay," says Magnus Larbrant, creative director at Crytek. "Should you go in and kill the boss first? If you come in there early, do you have the right equipment to kill him fast, and then use the boss compound as a defensive thing? Or should you wait for some other guy to kill him, and then when he runs away you try to kill him?"

It's a fascinating prospect, one that blends cooperative and competitive multiplayer in a way that puts a novel spin on various emerging trends in the

We stalk the wilderness for a glimpse of Crytek's new multiplayer

THRILL OF

multiplayer sphere. *Showdown*'s influences range from the likes of *Left4Dead* and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* to games like *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and Crytek's own *Crysis* series.

A round of *Showdown* is split roughly into three "acts". Up to ten Hunters (playing either solo or in teams of two) spawn at random locations in *Showdown*'s haunted wetland. They begin tracking their prey by seeking out "clues", supernatural anomalies scattered across the map, which the Hunters can locate using an ability called "Dark Vision". Each clue greys out a chunk of the map, and collecting three clues will pinpoint the exact location of their target.

If they so choose, players can then proceed to battle the boss. In the game's current Early Access state, there are two of these to fight, while Crytek plans to include several more in the final version. Each has different strengths and weaknesses, and requires different weapons and strategies to defeat. Once beaten, there is a brief phase where the monster is "banished" »

"Our game is based on high-tension, that anticipation, that's what it's all about"

shooter, Hunt: Showdown

THE HUNT





PREDATOR OR PREY?

MEET HUNT: SHOWDOWN'S FEARSOME BIG-GAME DUO

***Hunt: Showdown*'s matches centre around your encounter with the boss. These massive monsters are tough to kill and have unique strengths and weaknesses, but offer huge rewards to any Hunter who can defeat them and escape with the prize. Here's our introduction to the two bosses *Showdown* currently lets you fight.**

Boss 1: THE BUTCHER

DESCRIPTION: **Imagine if Jason Voorhees tried to start a new serial-killer fashion trend by wearing the severed head of a pig.**

STRENGTHS: **Extremely durable, immune to fire.**

WEAKNESSES: **Shotguns and explosives.**

NOTABLE ABILITIES: **Can kill most hunters with just two hits.**

STRATEGY: **The Butcher requires close-quarters combat to do any real damage, but can squash Hunters into jelly in a couple of swipes. The best solution is for one Hunter to kite him with a long-range weapon like a rifle, while the other Hunter gets behind him with a shotgun. Repeat until the Butcher becomes the butchered.**

Boss 2: THE SPIDER

DESCRIPTION: **See above.**

STRENGTHS: **Fast, agile, and good at hiding.**

WEAKNESSES: **Vulnerable to fire and most guns.**

NOTABLE ABILITIES: **Can climb walls, spits poison.**

STRATEGY: **The Spider can easily bamboozle Hunters with its quick movements and ability to walk on all surfaces. It particularly likes to rush out from dark corners to spit a glob of burning poison at you. Defeating the spider comes mainly down to tracking its movements and not letting it get behind you.**

> *"If you look at the old game, it was more of a stylised, cartoon game, because I think that was the DNA of that studio"*

to whatever hellish realm it emerged from, after which the successful Hunters must retreat safely to one of several extraction points dotted around the map.

This is how a match of *Showdown* plays in theory. Chances are your own experience of it will be far from this straightforward. Complicating everything you do in *Showdown* is the presence of those other players. Although each match has clear phases, Hunters can encounter one another at any point. "It's a sandbox. You can go wherever you want," Larbrant says. "Obviously everybody is going to gravitate towards [the boss]. But also on the clue aspect, when you're picking a clue, everybody is looking for the same clues too. So you're gonna collide there."

There are no rules on how you approach the hunt itself. You could follow the basic outline, track down the clues and kill the monster. But you could equally let another group of Hunters do the hard work for you, then try to steal their hard-earned winnings by assaulting the boss' location during the banishment phase, or by lurking near an extraction point and hoping to ambush the competition. You could assign yourself the role as a hunter of Hunters, trying to take out the competition before they get to the boss. "Or you could just say, 'You know what? I need to grind for my next unlock', and all you do is you go and kill some grunts, and extract to keep your Hunter alive, and unlock the next rank. It's up to you how you want to play, really," Larbrant adds.

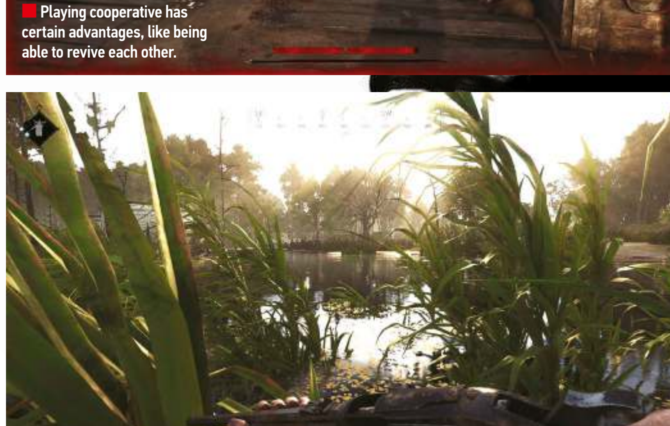
The reason behind this open-ended structure is simple: to build tension. Crytek wants *Showdown* to feel highly unpredictable, to engender in players a sense of anticipation and apprehension that builds with every step they take. "What's around the corner? Could it kill me? Should I risk my life going in there? What do I hear? What do I have? Should I wait, should I not?" Larbrant says.

It's a fitting theme for developers Crytek, whose designers have lived for many years beneath their own cloud of uncertainty. *Hunt: Showdown* itself arose from the ashes of another project, produced by one of Crytek's many now-defunct studios. The game began life as *Hunt: Horrors Of The Gilded Age*, a four-player, cooperative shooter in the vein of *Left4Dead* that was being designed by Crytek USA. Composed largely of designers hired from Vigil Studios – the creators of *Darksiders* – Crytek USA was one of several subsidiary studios that Crytek had either founded or purchased between 2007 and 2013. These included Crytek Seoul, Crytek Shanghai, Crytek Budapest, Crytek Black Sea, and the former creators of *Timesplitters*, Free



The basic zombie mobs are easy to kill, but have a habit of sneaking up on you.





Playing cooperative has certain advantages, like being able to revive each other.



The more built-up areas of the map are often mazy and tricky to navigate.

Radical Design, renamed Crytek UK upon their acquisition in 2009.

It was a period of rapid expansion for the Frankfurt-based company – perhaps too rapid. In June 2014, it was reported that Crytek had missed wage payments and withheld bonuses to both Crytek UK and Crytek USA. Shortly after this, the company issued a statement that it was in a "transitional phase", and began shuttering its subsidiaries even faster than it had acquired them. Crytek UK and Crytek Black Sea were sold to Deep Silver and Sega respectively, while the Seoul, Shanghai, Budapest and USA studios were all closed down by the end of 2016.

Despite the chaos happening around them, the Frankfurt office continued making games, releasing VR titles *The Climb* and *Robinson: The Journey* in 2016 and 2017. Meanwhile, the unfinished *Hunt: Horrors Of The Gilded Age* was brought over from Crytek USA so that the Frankfurt studio – where the engineers behind *Far Cry* and *Crysis* preside – could assess its potential for the future. Given the wider instability across the company as a whole, logically the best thing to do would be to finish *Gilded Age* as quickly as possible and get it shipped. Instead, Crytek decided to ditch the entire project, except for two things: the name (or at least one word in the name), and the 19th century Louisiana setting.

Considering the context, this decision seems like madness from the outside. So what prompted it? Larbrant explains that the decision was made at a "high level" on the basis that the title's style didn't fit with the ethos of the Frankfurt studio as a whole. "If you look at the old game, it was more of a stylised cartoon game, because I think that was the DNA of that studio," Larbrant says. "Our DNA is not that. Like a lot of us made Crysis games and *Far Cry*, stuff like this."

In short, the Frankfurt studio's design output is founded upon certain key pillars. Realism is one, emergent play another. *Horrors Of The Gilded Age* was a linear, highly stylised action game, all of which are far removed from what Crytek is familiar with as a developer. Hence a message came down for Larbrant from management; make a new game that focuses more specifically on the word 'Hunt'.

"The direction I gathered was, 'Do a game where the anticipation is more of a thing,' he explains. So this is exactly what Larbrant focused on. "We had to break hunting down in to puzzle pieces; what does it mean? Well, it's the unknown. What is the unknown? Well, it's what I can't see. Why am I scared? Well, if I hear something horrible from what I can't see and I don't know where it is, well, that's creepy. And then we started to break down the whole game like that."

This led the team to make some immediate decisions. They scrapped the four-player, cooperative side of the game entirely, instead opting for a hybrid of competitive and cooperative play. "It's you and your buddy," Larbrant says. "As I said before, our game is based on high tension, that anticipation, that's what it's all about. Your buddy getting scared makes you scared."

It's worth noting that it is possible to play *Showdown* on your own, but unlike, say, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, solo players reside on the same servers as the two-man teams. They also miss out on certain advantages, such as having another player able to revive you. "Playing single player, it works. It's just super hard," Larbrant says. "What we want is to push the social aspect. But we don't wanna shy away from single-player guys either."

Crytek also switched the experience from third person to first person. "If we had a game about the unknown, if you're playing third person and you can always see what's around the corner when you're moving around then we're losing that DNA", Larbrant explains. Crytek did, however, decide to retain *Gilded Age*'s setting, as it fit their concept of hunting monsters in a strange and unpredictable environment. "I think everybody is a bit intrigued by that time and era, the possibilities, the mystery, the new things being invented," Larbrant adds. "I call our style "Dark Realism", where it's all dirt, mud and blood, it's all about that."

Although the setting itself was saved, Crytek ditched the linear, sequential levels of *Gilded Age*, redesigning the experience around a small open-world map, which Larbrant explains is the same size as a level in the original *Crysis*. This map itself comprises a mixture of wetland »

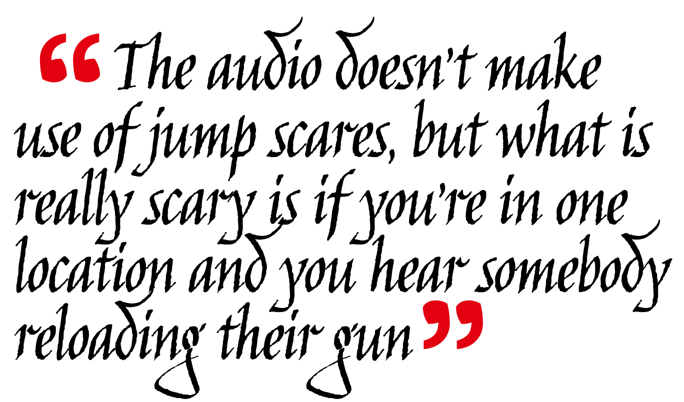
wilderness and what might generously be called settlements – pockets of dilapidated buildings; churches, fishing villages and farms. These are hidden among thickets of trees and bushes where it's difficult to see what's ahead of you, and separated by large expanses of open marsh that players regularly need to wade through, slowing their movements and leaving them highly exposed.

"It's a very tactical sandbox," Larbrant says. "We're hiding a lot, but we're also telling you a lot through audio, and based on the audio and your gear, we want you to make different choices… you always need different options to get into one of those compounds where the boss can be. You can risk running there quickly on the open field, or you can run in the cornfield. On the other hand, the cornfield starts moving. So somebody in a high position could see you. Or you can take the long way around in the woods, right? Now, obviously different AI are specialised to work in these spaces as well."

Meanwhile, the map is crammed with what Larbrant refers to as "Sound traps". These range from pens containing chickens or dogs that start making noise if you startle them, to chains that dangle from factory ceilings, clinking as you attempt to shuffle past.

Successful hunting in *Showdown* relies on remaining unheard as well as unseen, such as dispatching AI zombies with melee weapons rather than signalling your location to other hunters by shooting them. "The audio doesn't make use of jump scares, but what is really scary is if you're in one location and you hear somebody reloading their gun," says Özbayram.

Mechanically, *Showdown* is certainly formidable when it comes to ratcheting up the tension. The prevalent sound traps and wandering AI enemies encourage slow, methodical play, checking your angles, trying to stick to cover, and listening intently to the environment. The game forces you to make constant small-scale choices,



While Crytek is known primarily as a visual powerhouse, it's in the discussion of the game's audio that the developers seem most animated. "There's a lot of sound around you," says Fatih Özbayram, a producer on *Showdown*. "You hear player voices, You hear enemies, you hear the world, and you need to find the right balance to actually emphasise on the right sound that players should know, or should be able to read."

It's not surprising that the developers seem particularly excited about this. Within a couple of matches, it's clear that sound plays a huge role in *Showdown*'s play. Each gunshot echoes right across the map – as does voice chat and footsteps – clueing you into where other groups of hunters are and how far away they might be.

whether to fight a particularly tough zombie or work your way around, to explore a cluster of shacks for health and ammo, or press on to face the boss before somebody else gets there. *Showdown* is particularly intense when played on its night-map. Visibility is much lower, making it much easier to stumble unwittingly into a cluster of enemies. Equipping a light source will naturally solve this problem, but will also turn you into a beacon for other Hunters to literally shoot for.

When combat erupts, a calm head and a steady hand is important. The weapons herald from the tail-end of the 19th century, an arsenal that includes revolvers, double-barrelled shotguns and repeater rifles. Even the most basic weapons are weighty and powerful, but they tend to be slow to fire. Your limited carrying capacity also means you need

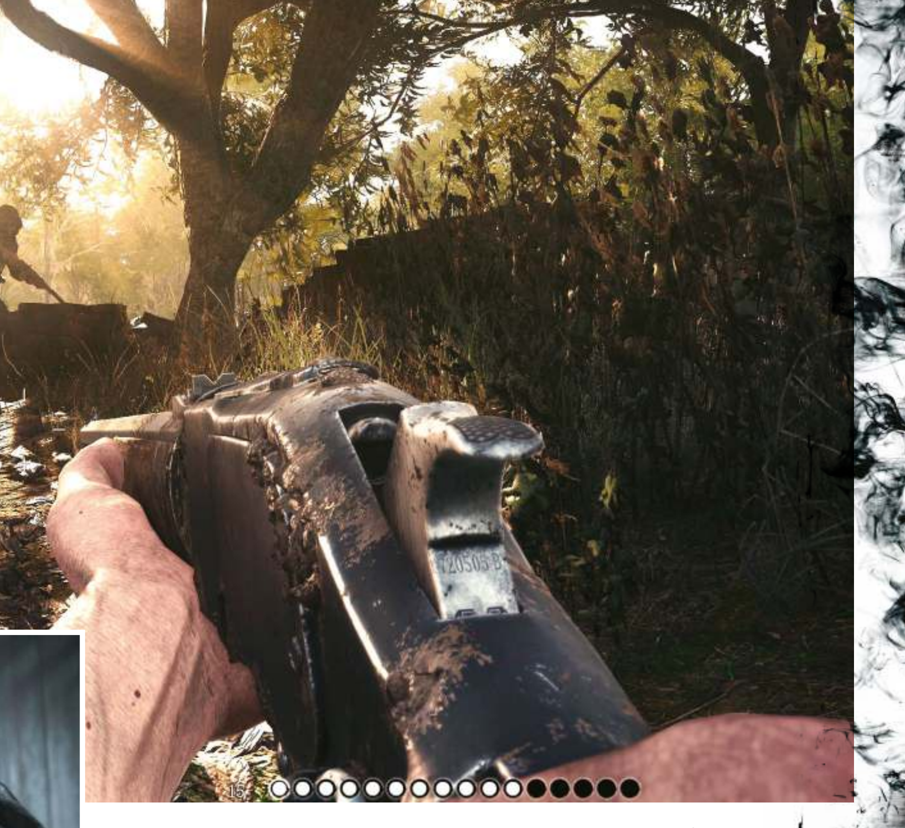




Environments are littered with "noise-traps", like dangling chains and broken glass.







to equip your team appropriately for a fight. Shotguns, for example, are very useful in the game's close-quarters boss fights, but aren't so helpful if you're exchanging gunfire with another hunting team on the far side of a swamp. Balancing your equipment against that of your partner's will help provide you with an edge in the hunt.

The core of *Showdown* demonstrates plenty of promise, but it isn't without its problems. Some are easily fixable, others less so. The game's slow pace is currently made ponderous by glacial loading times, which is especially galling if your hunter is killed early in a match. Moreover, the undead enemies aren't exactly the most thrilling to fight, while a couple, such as the "Wailer" zombie that shoots clouds of poisonous insects at you, are downright infuriating.

Showdown also employs a novel yet somewhat convoluted permadeath mechanic. Your general level and available unlocks are governed by your "Bloodline", which accrues XP across the whole game. Individual hunters, meanwhile, have their own XP and ability unlocks, which only last until that hunter dies.

On its own, this is fine. But new Hunters can only be recruited using money earned from previous Hunts, hence a spate of poor performances can leave you destitute, unable to afford anything but the most basic Hunter. Part of the problem is that the game consistently rewards you with XP for everything you do (such as killing zombies or other players), but only rewards you with cash for certain achievements (finding clues and killing the boss). It's understandable that Crytek want to focus the big rewards on the big game hunting, but surely one less zombie in the world is worth a few quid.

Crytek's immediate focus is to stabilize connectivity and reduce loading times, after which the company plans to begin adding new content. These will be small things at first, like scopes for weapons. But further plans include deployable booby traps and the addition of female hunters. "The good thing is there is positive feedback," considers Özbayram. "Some of it is in sync with what we want to do and some opened our eyes and made us think twice."

Showdown has arrived at an opportune moment. It is evidently inspired by some recent innovations in multiplayer gaming. How much this factored in the decision to entirely rework *Horrors Of The Gilded Age* remains unclear, although it's telling that the developers repeatedly emphasise the "social aspect" of *Showdown*. "We want this game to really be a Twitch game," Larbrant says. "Like an open-world sandbox map, players having fun together, recording videos together."

Showdown provides an experience that is distinct from the surging Battle Royale genre, offering more nuanced ways to play and a more interesting tactical challenge. Whether or not *Showdown*'s Damoclean dread truly is a form of catharsis for Crytek, there's little doubt that the studio understands its chosen theme well.

WELCOME TO THE SWAMP

HERE'S YOUR GUIDE TO GETTING AROUND IN SHOWDOWN'S LOUISIANA BACKWATER

Showdown's 1k x 1k map may not be the largest multiplayer open-world on offer, but it is quite complex nonetheless. To succeed in the game, you need to know not only where to go, but when to go there, how to get there, and what might await you when you arrive. Here's a quick rundown of the most significant points.



SETTLEMENT: **The settlements highlighted in bold type are usually where the action centres. Clues are often found in these areas, and the boss will spawn randomly at one of them. Narrowing down which one isn't the only challenge; once you get there, you'll need to find the entrance to the boss' underground lair.**

SUPPLY POINT: **Hunters have limited space for ammo and health, and you'll want to stock up on both before you venture toward a boss encounter. Careful, though, because supply points are a nexus for other Hunters.**

GREY AREA: **As you collect clues, areas of the map will be greyed out. This lets you know the boss isn't in that area. You can hedge your bets and try to locate him before finding all the clues, but it's a lot of ground to cover.**

WETLAND: **Many of _Showdown_'s key areas are separated by big chunks of open swamp. You can wade through the water, but it will slow you down and leave you open to being shot by any chancing Hunter with a rifle. The water itself is relatively safe apart from the odd zombie, but Crytek has plans to change this, although its quiet on precisely how.**

EXIT: **If you succeed in defeating the boss, you'll need to get to one of the three exits with the prize in order to reap the full reward. Choose your exit wisely, however, as other Hunters can attempt to ambush you en-route to safety.**

The Dark Side Of Dontnod

VAM

"I'M CONVINCED THAT EVERY DONTNOD GAME IS ABOUT CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE… ALL OF THEM," CONSIDERS STÉPHANE BEAUVERGER, THE STUDIO'S NARRATIVE DIRECTOR AS HE CONTEMPLATES THE CONFLICT THAT SITS AT THE HEART OF EVERY ONE OF DONTNOD'S CREATIVE ENDEAVOURS. THOSE TITLES, FOR ANY OF YOU THAT HAVEN'T BEEN PAYING ATTENTION, ARE COMPRISED OF A SERIES THAT HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED AND RELEASED OVER A DECADE, EACH OF THEM THEMATICALLY BOUND BY A FIXATION ON MANAGING MEMORY – OF TRYING TO ALTER THE DECISIONS THAT HAUNT US IN OUR MOST VULNERABLE MOMENTS.

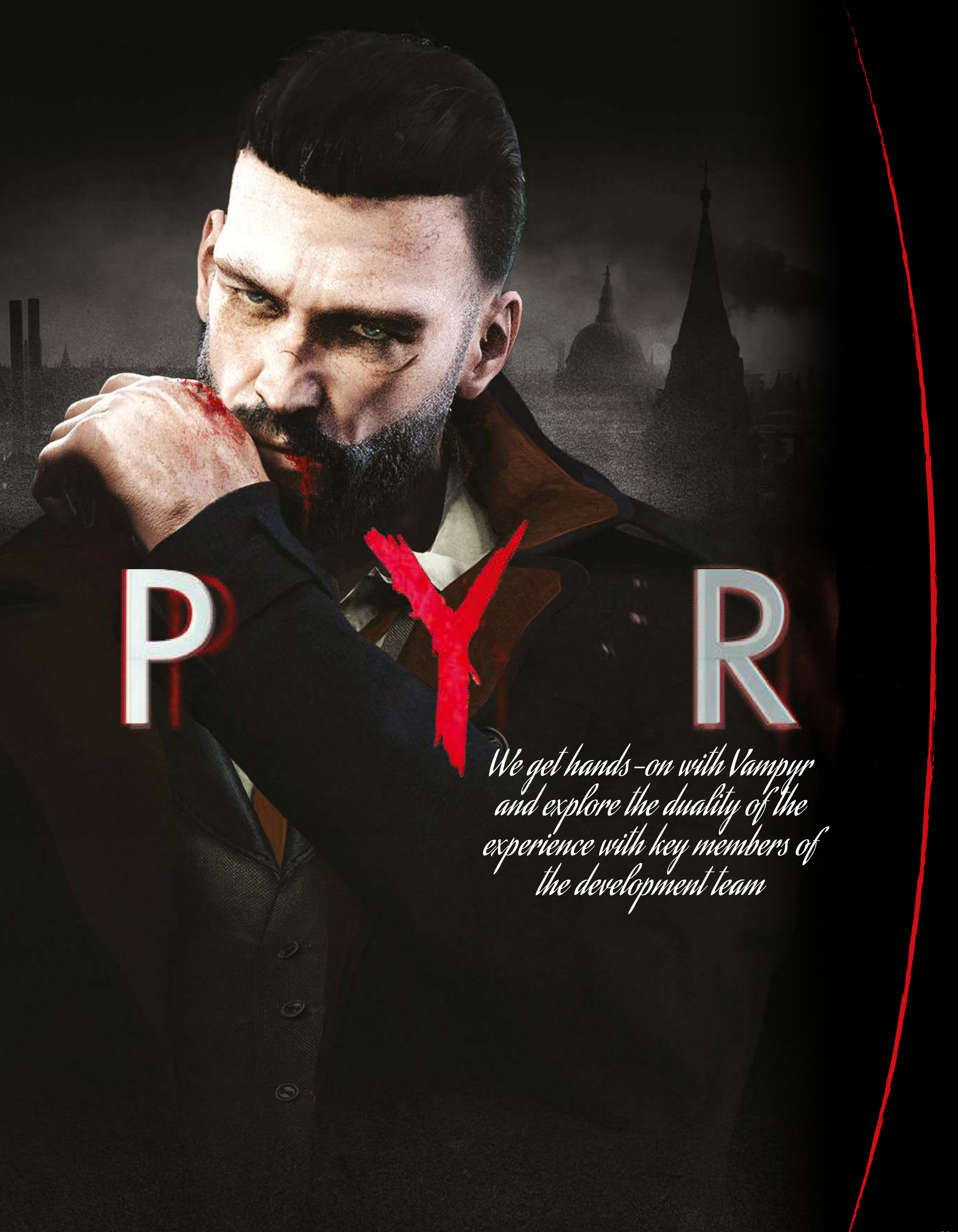
Remember Me, the studio's debut, rooted itself in a conflict of the existential variety, exploring the friction between choice, identity and representation in a digitally-driven world. *Life Is Strange*, Dontnod's sophomore effort, viewed similar themes through a decidedly analogue lens; the five-part episodic adventure framed a coming-of-age story around sacrifice, forcing players to accept that every one of their decisions would have an eventual consequence – be it in your own life or of those that surround you. Both titles used memories – and the alteration of existing ones – as a way of exploring what it means to be human, as a way of figuring out your place in the world.

What of the studio's latest, *Vampyr*, then? Well, *Vampyr* wants you to consider the implications of being forever haunted by your memory – of using it as a way of reminding you of your humanity as you sacrifice pieces of it to your inner demons.

On the surface, *Vampyr* looks like a somewhat traditional action-RPG, one that's driven by a rather traditional power fantasy. It casts you as a hunter of humans, as a powerful vampire stalking through London in the shadow of the early 20th century – the once great city plagued by a wave of death and decay, the streets beginning to resemble that of a Gothic mausoleum. Should you take the time to sink your teeth into the game, however, you'll begin to see something more interesting bleeding out through the puncture wounds in its skin. You're a vampire that remembers a time before the hunger; consumed by memories of a past life, you play as a creature that is struggling with a new-found hubgwe for blood as well as for violence.

Vampyr wants you to question whether you should hold the demons screaming at you from within at bay or succumb to your darkest urges entirely. As you're thrust into an effort to reclaim your humanity – ultimately doomed to be haunted by the results of your misdeeds – *Vampyr* presents an adventure in which the choices you make and the consequences of your actions will be far reaching for all that come to know you.

"This is a vampire story so, of course, things are far more grim and brutal," says Beauverger when we question him regarding the differences between *Vampyr*, *Remember Me* and *Life Is Strange*. But, he assures us,



P Y R

We get hands-on with Vampyr and explore the duality of the experience with key members of the development team

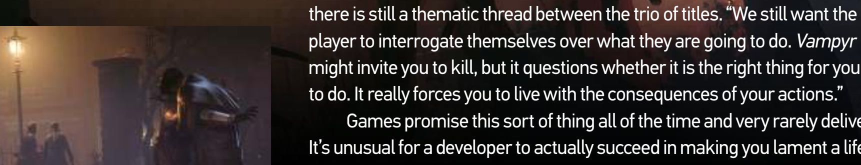
LONDON'S CALLING

Vampyr is set in London at a very interesting time, historically. While it isn't necessarily beholden to history, it takes a number of cues from the era to create a more exciting game world. The Spanish flu pandemic has largely cleared out the city, the citizens that have chosen to remain – due to necessity or perhaps the hint of opportunity – are further impacted by the fallout of the First World War. The arrival of vampires are an added complication that these downtrodden people could have done without.

Art director Gregory Szucs says that settling on London as the location was easy enough, driven by a desire to best serve the mythos the team was attempting to create: "Since this is a vampire game it had to be dark, grim, sad, rainy and gloomy…" ah, London was the natural choice, then.

"We wanted to get the material right – we gathered a lot of historical reference – but it was never about making a 100 percent accurate replica. For us, it was important to pick and choose, to get that gloomy ambience that we decided that we wanted to explore through London's streets. It was a dark time; you're a vampire who only goes out at night, so we had to build the mood out around that… it was a balancing act to make it feel believable and to make it feel modern for the time.

"The setting and time period is rarely explored as well in few games, that's something they are going to find unique about *Vampyr*."



Choice and consequence run throughout *Vampyr*. Dontnod is banking on players leaning on their moral conscience to help keep violent tendencies in check, with the game shifting around how deeply you succumb to your vampyric instincts.





Vampyr succeeds when it leans on Dontnod's ability as a storyteller and world builder, though it really falters when it comes to combat. The fighting is finicky and unsatisfying, lacking the requisite feedback or dynamism to really hold the attention.

there is still a thematic thread between the trio of titles. "We still want the player to interrogate themselves over what they are going to do. *Vampyr* might invite you to kill, but it questions whether it is the right thing for you to do. It really forces you to live with the consequences of your actions."

Games promise this sort of thing all of the time and very rarely deliver. It's unusual for a developer to actually succeed in making you lament a life that's been lost at your hands; you're often cast as a thinly-veiled harbinger of death. Developers have become experts in finding any excuse in the world, to justify the slaughter of anything that dares to stand in your way. So, how exactly is Dontnod looking to leverage empathy to sell *Vampyr*'s core concept?

"You are a victim of what you have become," Beauverger teases, explaining that much of the experience stems from the conflict within. The game presents a more ambiguous idea of what is right and wrong as you step into the shoes of soldier-turned-doctor-turned vampire Jonathan Reid. "The dilemma of choosing to kill or spare a citizen is kind of unique. We really fought for that feature; the fact that you have to think about killing, and the fact that you never have to worry about whether you're playing the game 'correctly'."

Of course, just because Dontnod *wants* you to live with the consequences of your actions doesn't necessarily mean that players will abide. Instead, the studio has had to get creative and pour considerable time and resources into binding your conscience to the game world and its inhabitants. "We decided that you would only meet unique characters. All of the citizens have back stories, personal issues, secrets and relationships – we wanted the player to feel as if they are entering the intimacy of someone," says Beauverger of the 60 unique NPCs that can be found throughout London, with the game using an outbreak of the famously deadly 1918 Spanish flu pandemic as an excuse for the streets to be otherwise devoid of life and activity. "If you ask enough of the right questions they will begin to talk to you about the issues in their life… each of them reflecting a little part of what it's like to be a Londoner at the time, depending on where they [sit] on the social scale."

"That was the most important part of my job, I think," considers Beauverger, looking back over the project that has consumed close to three years of his life. "Apart from writing the storyline, creating these 60 intriguing characters – and giving the player an incentive to talk with each of them and find out who they are – was the most important part of my job." That's largely down to Vampyr being so heavily system driven. Not



only does the game have surprisingly deep RPG roots – with a complex web of weapon and ability upgrades to manage and invest in – but it has also been designed in such a way that all of its characters are linked in one way or another, an aspect of the game that is tracked and managed within the menus for players to clearly track and pour over. This is an area of the game that is incredibly impressive. The studio has shown proficiency for developing excellent starring mechanics around a very clear concept, and *Vampyr* is no slouch in that department.

This game casts you in a position of power, as a medic working at a local hospital. It's up to you whether you choose to abuse this position or use it as a force for good, to assist the citizens that are struggling with everything from the fallout of the First World War to a deadly flu and local infestation of nefarious vampires. It's this quality that makes *Vampyr* feel authentic in a way that few other games that look to tell a vampire story are able to replicate. "The vampire is a creature of deceit," Beauverger tells us, noting that the hospital is the perfect cover, given the wave of death washing over the city. "We are putting the player in a situation where everybody in the hospital will look to you as a brilliant surgeon who will save their life… but at the same time you have the right to kill everybody in the hospital if you want to. It's up to you… it's going to be very interesting to see how players react."

So long as your level is high enough, you can assault and feast on any of the named characters in the game. In return you'll get a healthy dose of XP, potentially open up new lines of inquiry (or paths forward) in your investigation to confront whoever it is that turned you into a vampire against your will, and to acquire the all-important resource necessary to upgrade your abilities and powers: blood.

"The studio has shown proficiency for developing excellent starring mechanics around a very clear concept, and Vampyr is no slouch in that department"

What's stopping you from going on a killing spree and quickly getting access to the game's coolest-looking abilities then? Dontnod is encouraging players to speak with citizens before murdering them by directly incentivising conversation. "[Players] will have to listen to certain characters to go further in the storyline, but everything else is just discussion that you can [engage in] for as long as you wish. It's up to you how deeply you want to get to know each character because we wanted the player to feel free to kill anybody at random if they want… you can go through the entire game without having a clue about who were the guys you killed," says Beauverger, a teasing smile the only response we get as we attempt to gauge how drastic the consequences could become across the adventure.

If you become friends with characters – helping them with odd jobs that make up the side-quests through the semi-open world district – you'll be granted a bonus should you later decide to drain them. You can push players to make the difficult decision between saving new-found friends or draining them in an effort to get a small increase to their health bar or improve the sharpness of their claws.

Interestingly, and we weren't able to glean how far reaching this would be from our hands-on session. Dontnod also promises that your assault on the population will also begin to warp the world around you. Killing off characters will eventually destabilise the district; hub areas could close entirely should you kill the proprietors, pushing the other characters out into different areas and altering certain threads of the storyline, not to mention catching the attention of the charmless vampire hunters hot on your tail.

We pressed Beauverger on why he believes that a little conversation will be enough to keep the blood lust of players at bay. We get it, it's a cool idea, but given gaming's propensity for violence we were curious as to whether the players would actually feel the conflict at the heart of the game – *Vampyr* is, after all, going to be a more challenging game for those that choose not to engage in a little evening murder, the all-important blood to upgrade your abilities otherwise difficult to come across. "We figured it out early on," Beauverger tells us. "We knew we wanted the player to feel some guilt when taking a life, so my colleagues did some research."

What Dontnod discovered was surprising. When it surveyed players asking whether they like to play as a force for good or evil in a videogame, 80 percent of the players leaned towards good. We raise an eyebrow in disbelief to which Beauverger laughs, noting: "That surprised me too. [But] it means that there is a moral compass in everyone; to take a life in a videogame – not in a fighting situation, but in cold blood, when it is calculated – it is much more difficult. To push the player to go in this uneasy »

■ ***Vampyr* is being created by many of the core team behind *Life Is Strange* and *Remember Me*. It's the studio's second attempt at a 'double-A' action game, with *Vampyr* also coming with the added design complication of a semi-open world and deep-rooted RPG systems.**





Building relationships with characters is key to progression in *Vampyr.* The more time you spend with the 60 unique citizens in the game, the more lines of investigation and routes through the story you'll open up as you hunt the mysterious vampire that turned you.

BUILDING THE MYTHOS

Vampyr **isn't beholden to any of the 'classic' vampire mythology born out of folklore and popular culture over the years. The team had the freedom to pick and choose which elements it wanted to bring to the project, casting out the ones it felt would make the gameplay experience less interesting for the players.**

"The figure of the vampire has had so many aspects, throughout comics, movies, books and videogames. We had to choose which parts of the mythical creature we wanted to enhance," Vampyr's narrative director Stéphane Beauverger tells us, explaining that the team used the classic Gothic interpretation as a starting point before beginning to chip away at it.

"There are parts of the mythical vampire figure that we did not keep for the game. For example, you will see your reflection in the mirror; you can see a picture of yourself, because you are not a ghost, you are made of flesh and bone. You can't turn into a bat; you can't slide into a door by becoming a mist *but* fire and sun will be very dangerous for you."

Art director Gregory Szucs notes that many of these decisions were made in service of building a better game experience. "Most of the decisions were based around that... of us deciding what would be cool from a gameplay standpoint or what could be useful to the story, and we built that up brick by brick."

Some of these, Szucs tells us, will have a pretty huge impact on the progression of the story and your ability to find new routes through the story and its situations. "As a vampire you have to be invited into anybody's home to enter. But as a doctor in a time where everyone is sick and looking for your help you might discover a few ways to exploit your position…"

"When you kill somebody," Beauverger teases, proving once and for all that Dontnod can't go a single game without integrating the manipulation of memory in some form or another, "you get access to the victim's memories. It's a strange way to run a background search, but when you kill somebody you will know who they were," he says, laughing. "That's a vampire privilege."

"The RPG systems may indeed be deep and finely tuned, but the combat is frustratingly straightforward and ineffectual"

moral situation I think it will be one of the most important aspects of the game… once something begins to feel as human as you it becomes more difficult to kill."

Vampyr will track all of your decisions behind the scenes. As you give in to your animal instinct you may start to see cosmetic changes to your character while other players in the world will start to become suspicious of your actions and motivation. As Beauverger tells us, choice and consequence is at the heart here, and Dontnod will reward players for following any given path through he game. "There are four different endings. Three reflect how good or bad of a vampire you have been all throughout the game, and there is a fourth hidden one that is much more difficult to achieve – especially made for those who went through the game without killing anyone."

Both of Dontnod's previous efforts have been celebrated for their high concepts and derided for elements of their execution. It's been, in many respects, incredibly frustrating to follow Dontnod's journey over the past decade, to see a studio become so adept at world building and storytelling only to struggle on 'the basics' of combat design and optimisation. It's similarly frustrating to report, then, that *Vampyr* has some fairly familiar problems for Dontnod – the studio is in danger of becoming a specialist in embracing its shortcomings, so intent it seems to concentrate on one corner of the game experience over others.

The RPG systems may indeed be deep and finely-tuned, but the combat is frustratingly straightforward and ineffectual. The game may push you to consider the moral quandary of taking a life in cold blood, but it eagerly thrusts you into situations where your only option is to slash and bash your way through faceless, nameless and charmless vampire hunters with wild abandon. *Vampyr* feels like it wants to be an open-ended RPG driven by dialogue, choice and consequence, but it's one that succumbs to a perceived need for combat to entice players into the experience to begin with.

In treating personnel with quest markers above their heads differently to the everyday folk attempting to protect them from, well, *you,* the game creates this weird disassociation from itself and its excellent core conceit. You'll listen to Sabrina issue a sob story about how she wishes for a better life – one away from the miserable plague-ridden, vampire infested streets of London. Seconds later you find yourself smashing buttons to swipe and bite with little moral recompense at Unsuspecting Henchman Number Three who is attempting to provide her with exactly that life.

By failing to make any real distinction between the two types of NPC that you'll encounter, *Vampyr* also robs you of the opportunity to make any distinction for yourself. It impacts immersion in a way that, frankly, we struggle to see being rectified ahead of its launch in June 2018. Couple this with the somewhat stilted, mechanical combat and the alarm bells start ringing. It's rough around the edges for sure, with a limited bank of animations also ensuring that you'll quickly begin to see the same combos play out over and over again. Combat has been a source of frustration in Dontnod games since the beginning, and it's frustrating to see that little has improved in this respect.

Conflict is at the heart of *Vampyr.* It's a game that feels at odds with itself, divided between its high-concept and the reality of its design. It's difficult to see Dontnod rectifying this ahead of the launch, although we are hopeful that some of the internal tension may be alleviated as the game begins to steadily open itself up to experimentation as the hours wind on. In many respects, *Vampyr* looks to be another typical Dontnod release, one in which a brilliant idea is ultimately impeded by a handful of frustrating design decisions and disappointing combat mechanics.

We'd love to be proved wrong, of course, but sometimes there's little that can be done to keep the darkness at bay. 



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Reviews



70

METAL GEAR SURVIVE

What does the first Metal Gear release without Hideo Kojima in the wings offer fans of the series?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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Above: The most common enemy you'll encounter in *Survive* is the Wanderer, a grotesque human puppet caked in crystals and sporting a horn where a human head should be.

DID YOU THINK KONAMI'D LAY DOWN AND DIE?

Metal Gear Survive

As you reach *Metal Gear Survive*'s title screen, your protagonist will glance over at what remains of Mother Base, its maze of stairs and walkways bent and broken, the Diamond Dogs insignia faded. You watch on as it struggles under its own weight, snapped struts jutting out like a shattered steel rib cage. It's a touch conspicuous, perhaps, this metaphor, but it's clear: Metal Gear, as we know and love it, is dead, and a new incarnation is rising (quite literally) from its iron bones.

What we know about Konami's messy divorce with its hitherto golden child Hideo Kojima is probably nothing compared to what we don't know (and likely never will). But while some of us shuffled nervously when starkly different spin-off survival game *Survive* was unveiled, many were just relieved to see the franchise was still alive. Konami birthed some of gaming's most iconic franchises; Castlevania, Silent Hill, and – of course – Metal Gear. We were curious as to what a Kojima-less Metal Gear would look like, sure, but that doesn't mean we wanted it to fail.

This isn't the first Metal Gear game shaped without Kojima at the helm, though. PlatinumGames' fantastically flamboyant *Rising* thrust the franchise well and truly out of its comfort zone, but MG remains renowned for its stealthy mechanics, indulgent cinematics and fantastical storylines. Reinventing it as a horror survival game was a gutsy move – it's just so frustrating that it didn't quite work out.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-4 multiplayer)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Occurring in the time between *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain*, you play as Captain, an anonymous soldier yanked through a wormhole and into Dite, a "world beyond wormholes". It's baffling, this unsteady balance of gritty survival realism against improbable tales of wormholes and time-travel. Of everything that doesn't quite sit right about *Survive*, it's the story that rankles most; even set against Metal Gear's typically theatrical tales – bar one admittedly dazzling twist – *Survive*'s story is weak, and its world-building forgettable.

TURN 'GUESS WHAT THIS CHARACTER DOES NEXT!' INTO A DRINKING GAME AND YOU'D BE UNCONSCIOUS – OR DEAD – WITHIN AN HOUR

Now, maybe you're a seasoned survivalist. Maybe you've played *ARK* or *DayZ*, or you just instinctively know that dirty water should be sterilised over a campfire. *Survive* doesn't expressly tell you this, though, and it's only via the laborious menu system that you'll make this discovery. So if *MGS* is your first foray into survival games, don't expect it to hold your hand; while some aspects – such as driving, or using skill points – are curiously over-explained, other stuff – usually the things specific to a survival game

Left: Don't ever, *ever* run away from the meat! There's seemingly never enough food in this place, so make sure you snag any livestock you spot. And yes, we agree: the scream they make as they die is indeed awful.
Below: It's not subtle, but looking out at the smashed and sorrowful Mother Base makes it clear that Kojima's reign is over, and *Metal Gear Survive* is not like anything we've played before.

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO COMPLETE THE SOLO CAMPAIGN?

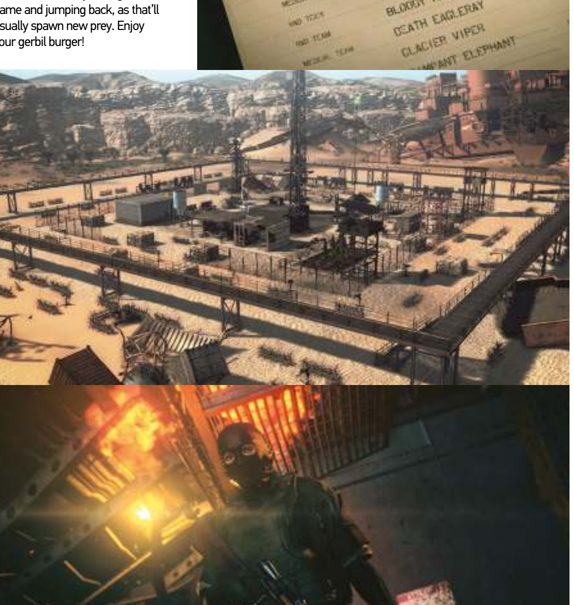
Despite the budget price, Survive isn't stingy, offering a good 30-35 hours of gameplay – and more should you venture into co-op.

Q. DO I NEED TO HAVE PLAYED A METAL GEAR GAME BEFORE?

Prior knowledge of the Metal Gear universe is helpful, but not mandatory in *Survive*'s self-contained spin-off.

Q. I'M DESPERATE FOR FOOD – HELP!

Starving? You can reload empty animal locations by exiting the game and jumping back, as that'll usually spawn new prey. Enjoy your gerbil burger!



– aren't discussed in any great detail at all. Captain is constantly hungry, but there's not enough food to eat. Your campmates – some ex-military – require you to personally treat their boohoos. You'll spend too much time in the menu system, desperately scavenging supplies, or dropping stuff off because your pack's too heavy. Again.

You'll traipse over miles of anonymous scrubland, squinting through the dust for the telltale glint of containers (the mini-game that pops up every time you do that gets old pretty quickly). Most environments offer a different variation of the same sepia landscape you've seen before. The dialogue is poor, and the characterisation predictable (one of your rescued squaddies asserts it must "all be a dream"). If you turned 'Guess What This Character Does Next' into a drinking game, you'd be unconscious within an hour.

The squad you painstakingly assemble as you explore Dite – scavenging anything and everything as you go, naturally – are mostly insignificant, each new recruit looping through the same cutscene when you chuck them into Base Camp. You might not even talk to some refugees again, begging the question why you rescued them in the first place.

Captain barely reacts to anything, their face a slab of expressionless meat that you can quite literally change any time you fancy. And almost everything they do is aggravating; the eating noises; their utter lack of emotion; the fact they stand gawping at enemies rather than turning and fleeing. Even the achievement/trophy list lacks lustre: Hunt. Construction. Locksmith. Responder. The titles are as uninspired as the gameplay itself, which'll mostly have you reanimating Transporters or fetching Memory Boards, each segment closing with the same cutscene of Captain aggressively syncing their iDroid with the AI.

As for the enemies? While Silent Hill's Masahiro Ito designed the spectacularly unsettling Wanderers lurching towards you, they're spectacularly stupid, too, pottering into traps and fences without the sense to sidestep around them. You'll spend half the game standing behind a lone fence, stabbing stuff through the holes (except for when you reactivate a Transporter, at which point the Wanderers suddenly have the pinpoint precision of missiles, able to see, isolate and attack a wormhole device with stunning accuracy). The rest of the time, you're scrabbling around for something to eat or drink. While your arsenal does grow – and the survival tools at your disposal improve as your base matures – and you can revise loadouts, chances are you'll inevitably default to a variation of the long, thin melee weapon you crafted at the start.

On its own merit, *Survive* is a ruthless survival game, enabling you to scavenge and craft just about anything, rewarding meticulous exploration and sticking you in some bum-clenchingly tricky situations with horrifying creatures that really stack the odds against you. But managing these resources requires way too much of your time, and there's not enough of Metal Gear's humour or fourth-wall-breaking self-depreciation to balance it. We're all for survival, but when Captain needs to huddle down for a glass of milk and a roasted gerbil in the middle of the final boss battle, you know it's a step too far, and that's without the sodding microtransactions.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PYRAMID SCHEME: Silent Hill's Masahiro Ito – yes, the person behind Pyramid Head – brings a touch of the macabre to *MGS*' roster of thoroughly unsettling enemies. The Grabber and the Lord of Dust are, in particular, terrifyingly terrific.

SOMEONE LEFT A SECRET MESSAGE OR TWO IN METAL GEAR SURVIVE…

Shortly after you're prompted for the name you wish to christen Captain, you'll see it jotted down on Goodluck's clipboard in among a long list of soldiers' names. But while it's only on the screen for a moment or two, eagle-eyed fans have noticed that – reading from top to bottom (and skipping the first three names) – the initials spell out "KJP FOREVER", with KJP widely used as an abbreviation of the now defunct Kojima Productions.

But that's not all. The latter two names spell "BASTARD YOTA" and "CUNNING YUJI". Possibly an anonymous but forceful rebuttal against *Survive*'s director Yota Tsutsumizaki and producer Yuji Korekado? Or an inside joke at the senior team's expense? Guess we'll never know…



VERDICT 5/10
SURVIVING, BUT NOT THRIVING

SHAKY FOUNDATIONS BUILT ON SHAKY FOUNDATIONS

Kingdom Come: Deliverance

Let's take the elephant gun to that particularly large pachyderm in the room immediately – *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is a game with a hell of a lot that's problematic about it. Arguments about people of colour not featuring are backed up by the notion that there would be a very small chance of meeting a travelling merchant from a far-off land in such a small region of central Bohemia. At the same time there are plenty of references to bards throughout the game, a profession seen mainly in Gaelic culture. Each is as unlikely to be seen as the other, but one features and one does not.

Women are treated poorly, as they likely were back then, but the game seems to actively *delight* in this fact and push an obnoxious, hyper-masculine attitude down players' throats. And while *Kingdom Come* sets itself up as the bastion of realism (see: no people of colour), there are no children anywhere, you drink booze to save your game and the hero's journey ends up taking a very fairytale turn as the story progresses.

There's a lot of sneering hypocrisy to unpick, and even more to be taken from the director and lead writer's attitudes and viewpoints. Look up Burzum and Daniel Vávra. If you try to fob that off as an innocent mistake, more power to you. You're able to ignore more than us. But is *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* a racist, hateful game? No. It's more complex than that. Safe to say, it is very much a game coming from a specific, nationalistic/historic viewpoint – and it's not a viewpoint many, ourselves included, will be comfortable with.



Above: Combat takes a good deal of getting used to, but once you're at one with the flow it's far less frustrating than it initially seems. In fact, it reveals itself to be a rather abstruse system of smoke and mirrors that soon makes way when you're suitably levelled-and-perked up.

Set in 1403, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* tells the sometimes interminably dull, sometimes surprisingly fun, tale of Henry – son of a blacksmith and revenge-seeker – as he muddles his way through the Kingdom of Bohemia's middle ages. It's an open-world RPG requiring you to drink alcohol called 'saviour schnapps' to save the game, while simultaneously selling itself as historically accurate to a ridiculous degree. Just so long as you ignore the previously mentioned issues.

In practice this leaves us with a game that is ambitious and rich in its features, offering a depth you might not expect from a largely independent, Kickstarter-backed production. At the same time, it's not a game that offers real freedom, or the ability to approach every problem how you see fit. You might want to ignore combat, as you've decided it's better to approach problems with a silver tongue (back to those bard references) – which works well until *KC:D* decides to throw you into a battle you *have* to take part in, or a conversation you just can't talk your way around. Don't take freedom to mean you're free to do as you please, take it to mean you're free to dawdle a bit before going through the motions the game demands you do. And that's just when it's not bugging out on you.

There are times when the myriad of glitches and bugs are endearing, pitching the game in your mind as an underdog tale of indie devs working as hard as they can to make an ambitious epic. But there are other times when it just frustrates and reminds you it's more a case of a studio aiming *way* too high. It's minor things, like convincing a wayfaring, would-be knight to go home to his mother instead of challenging strangers to duels, only to hear him remark "I'll wait for someone else to challenge" on leaving the dialogue. It could be a bigger element, like making Henry learn to read, only to be met by a dialogue option stating "I can't read" and no other way out of the situation. It may well be one of the many crashes you will experience in this flimsily put together game.

IT FEELS LIKE SHOULD YOU DO ANYTHING EVEN REMOTELY OUT OF THE ORDINARY, THE GAME WILL CRASH OR OTHERWISE BREAK

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Czech Republic
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Warhorse Studios
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

TWO WORLDS





WORSE THAN

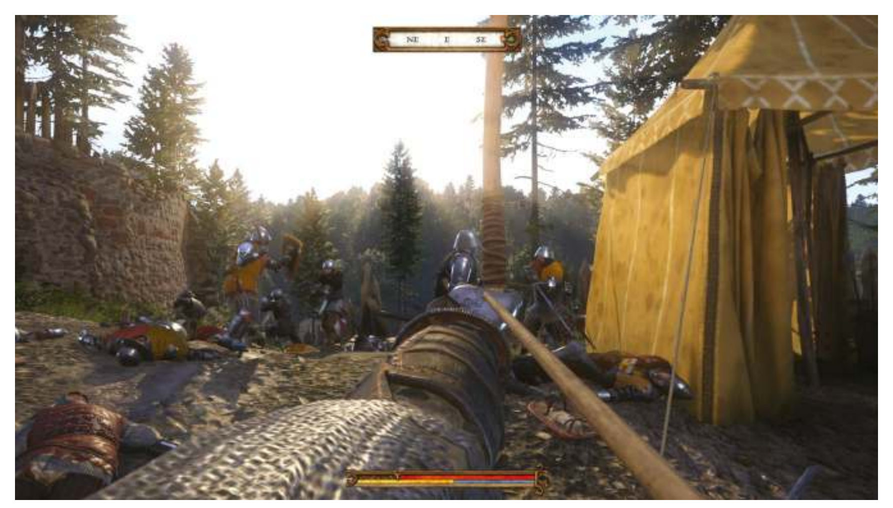
MOUNT & BLADE: WARBAND



You see, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* ends up being an exercise in tiptoeing around fragile

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT HENRY

Our intrepid hero is a humble blacksmith's son – he loves his parents, he likes to drink, he's a bit of a philandering sod. He's very much a regular, middle ages guy. On one hand, this is unique in the power fantasy-dominated world of gaming, as an illiterate, god-fearing protagonist isn't what we're ever presented with. This illusion of normalcy falls by the wayside as you progress through *Kingdom Come*, however, with trope on top of trope leading to a situation where Henry is thrust into a ludicrous – and, frankly, *boring* – situation regarding his heritage and standing in society. For what could so easily have been an *intentionally* underwhelming take on a man's place in the world, the temptation to make him rise above his station was obviously too much for Warhorse. A missed opportunity.



FAQs

Q. BE THERE DRAGONS?

No. This is medieval simulation, not fantasy. Though there's plenty to still classify it as fantasy.

Q. HOW HARD IS LOCKPICKING?

Hard enough that, at the time of writing, Warhorse is working on a patch to make it more straightforward.

Q. HOW OPEN IS IT?

You can approach things how you like, in general. Except for when you can't.

Below: Fast travel, bizarrely, makes you sit through an unskippable medieval GPS display of Henry's progress. It isn't 'realistic' – it's a 'waste of time'.



systems, lest you do something the game considers suboptimal and break everything. Circle around a guard – in full view – to choke him out; fight an enemy soldier who ignores the mace at his waist, instead trying to punch you down while a dozen of his compatriots stand motionless, watching; steal a key to gain entrance to a house, only to mistakenly wake an occupant who then goes on to lock the door, meaning you can't get back out of the house… even though you *have* the bloody key.

And the biggest problem here is there are points when *Kingdom Come* is good fun; times when it looks astonishingly pretty and you *do* want to lose yourself in the medieval (simulation) fantasy. You know it can do so much better, but to have this constant anxiety looming over you that at any given point, should you do anything even remotely out of the ordinary, the game will crash or otherwise break – it's ruinous. It's shoddy and frustrating, often leading to lost progress as you revert to a non-broken save (thus exacerbating the saviour schnapps irritation) and begin the merry – *careful* – dance all over again. It's unfair to expect a relatively small team to make something as ambitious as this perfect, but after six years of development it's not unfair to expect something less broken.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance is a missed opportunity in many ways. Every time it comes close to settling into a positive rhythm, something pops up and derails your fun – whether that be a bug, a needlessly convoluted in-game system or just the nagging feeling that this is an incredibly boring game made with nationalistic, revisionist readings of history behind every single step of it. There will be those of you out there who get a lot from *KC:D*, but it needs you to take a lot of liberties, both with it and yourself, to get genuine enjoyment from it.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LIVING LIFE: Eat, sleep, wash, mend your clothes, learn to read – the busywork metagame in *KC:D* is one of its best parts. Even so, it does become tiresome after a point.



THE DULL, BROKEN SIDE OF MEDIEVAL BUSYWORK



SIMPLE, CHALLENGING AND UTTERLY MESMERISING

Celeste

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Matt Makes Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £17.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN OWLBOY

WORSE THAN SUPER MEAT BOY

Would you be willing to die 4,612 times in pursuit of a few hundred strawberries? *Celeste* quickly posits that its focus is in scaling a mountain, in confronting and overcoming your demons even as they scream at you to stop. But we all know that it's really about the strawberries.

Celeste's challenge (and to be clear, much of its magic) is self-imposed. It lies in you making an assumption that the game is lying to you in its earliest hours. "Strawberries will impress your friends, but that's about it," reads a postcard addressed to Madeline in an early loading screen. "Only collect them if you really want to!"

That's game director Matt Thorson goading us. It has to be. He *wants* us to ignore the bloody strawberries so that he can saddle us with some sort of crappy ending 18 hours later, forcing us to crawl back through the entire catalogue of challenge rooms picking them from the most perilous locations Celeste Mountain has to offer; an exercise in anger management, a cautionary test for any players that don't yet have 'accidental' damage insurance covering their Switch. Only collect them if we want to? Yeah, right… we see you, Thorson.

Celeste is, after all, a modern indie game – those strawberries will inevitably end up as a metaphor for something. Because there's no way that the game would have us break our fingers for something as redundant as, say, baking a strawberry pie to appease a millennial you met up on the mountain, an annoying old woman, an ill-tempered ghost, and the manifestation of your MySpace profile picture, right? Right.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PIXEL PERFECT Incredible attention to detail ensures that this platformer will very rarely frustrate, even in its most challenging areas

Above: Matt Makes Games is now responsible for two of the best games of the generation: *Celeste* in terms of single-player, and the excellent *TowerFall: Ascension* for multiplayer action.



Celeste makes the pursuit of its all-important mystery strawberries easy enough. No matter how challenging this excellent platformer may seem at any one time, each of its puzzles are heavily rooted in logic. They play by the internal rules that are quickly established in each of the seven core chapters, presenting an ever-escalating and invigorating series of navigational challenges. A checkpoint is never further than a screen away, and you should expect to never see any sort of game over screen or punishment for your numerous, numerous failings.

And, just to be clear, you *will* fail. Over and over. Failure is the catalyst for obtaining success, each of *Celeste*'s screens feeling like a fresh opportunity to overcome adversity with skill and dexterity. In many ways, *Celeste* feels like a natural evolution of the micro-challenge design popularised by *Super Meat Boy*. Bettering the indie classic with a more forthright pacing, hypnotic soundtrack, and poignant narrative frame that smartly leverages your ever-escalating determination and levels of stress as a way of exploring anxiety.

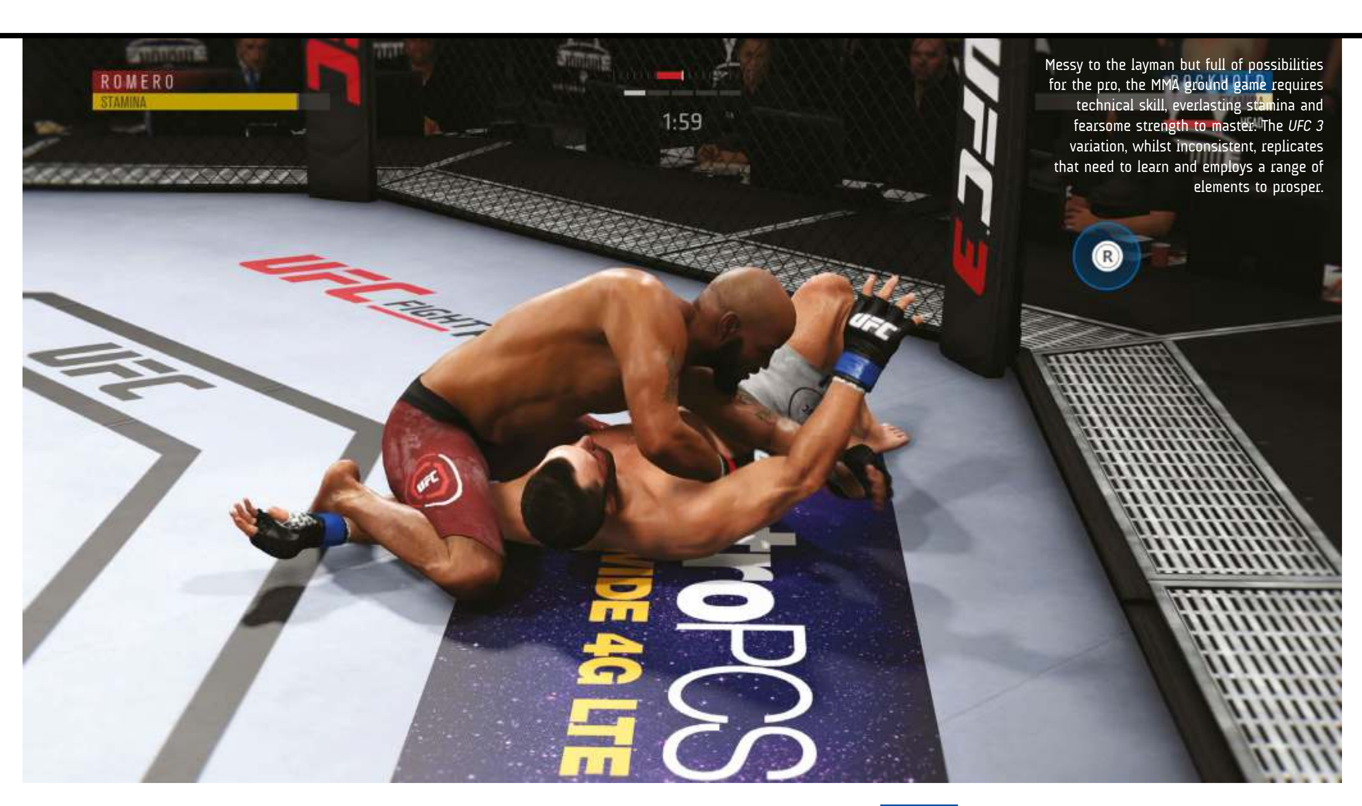
Celeste is excellent, an almost pixel-perfect platformer that will impress, regardless of whether you become obsessed with its collectables or not. And as for the strawberries, we wouldn't like to spoil the surprise entirely, but what we will say is this: we see you, Thorson. You're going on the list.



Above: While *Celeste* usually feels fair, it can occasionally cause heartbreak due to some strange path-finding decisions, which is particularly annoying given the labyrinthine design of a handful of its areas.



AN EXCELLENT PLATFORMER THAT NEVER FAILS TO SURPRISE



Messy to the layman but full of possibilities for the pro, the MMA ground game requires technical skill, everlasting stamina and fearsome strength to master. The *UFC 3* variation, whilst inconsistent, replicates that need to learn and employs a range of elements to prosper.

SUPER PUNCH-OUT!

EA Sports UFC 3

Face the pain, no escape, can you step to this? So goes a line in one of the UFC's theme songs. It's a sentiment that applies to the real sport as much as it does here. To master *EA Sports UFC 3*, you must submit to the fact that there are no shortcuts, that you will have to dedicate serious time to it and that lessons learned in other fighting and/or sports games don't necessarily apply here.

More so than the rest of its EA Sports stable mates, *UFC 3* is an experience aimed squarely at connoisseurs of the subject matter. Where casual fans of football can enjoy FIFA and watching only the Super Bowl provides enough knowledge to understand Madden, the part-time UFC fan is not catered for here.

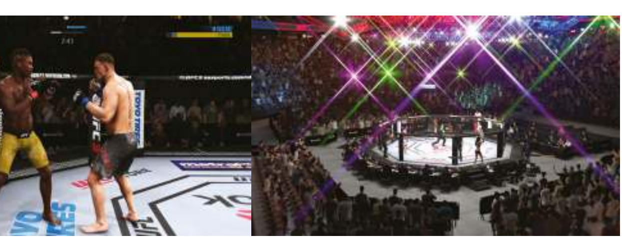
If you don't know your full guard from your side control or can't appreciate the subtler dynamics of the clinch then this isn't for you. Vague semblances of a tutorial system exist, but they're not fit for purpose if you're looking to learn mixed-martial arts from scratch.

The benefit here is that EA Canada can concentrate on providing exhaustive depth and not tie itself in knots trying to make an inherently complex sport appeal to all players. Learning to employ and guard against submissions, kicks, strikes, grapples and more is a process that requires adaptability and patience. Just when you think you've mastered it, a new level of complexity and opportunity reveals itself to be studied and incorporated into your fight strategies.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT: Career mode is, pound for pound, a far more rounded and diverse indulgence than that offered last time out. A constant peppering of fighter goals makes those long leaps between milestones worth making.

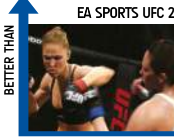


DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: EA Canada
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (2-2)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

EA SPORTS UFC 2



WORSE THAN

TEKKEN 7



While the core of the offering hasn't changed in a major way, *UFC 3* serves a more balanced and interesting bout of MMA than its two EA Sports-made predecessors. Superior animation quality renders the awkward transitions from the striking phase of a bout to the ground game a thing of the past, and a larger repertoire of attacks and takedowns means there are more ways to trigger those transitions.

Career mode is not perfect, but does a brilliant job of keeping you interested by setting you a consistent stream of small goals on your way to achieving the longer-term milestones. There remains a feeling of 'grind' to your progress as a fighter, but the carrot and the stick are better aligned than they have been in the past.

Improvements could be made in communicating the raw energy and excitement that accompanies a UFC event, though. Commentary is wooden, ring entrances are dull, and you can't shake the feeling that, for all its technical wizardry, the shock and awe factor of an MMA fight is missing. How, though, in a sport in which you can be knocked out with the first punch, do you make a game that's fair and rewards skill over luck?

The answer is out there somewhere, but for now *UFC 3* comes closest to it.



BRILLIANTLY REALISED FOR HARDENED MMA FANS



FAN SERVICE AND FIGHTING

Dissidia Final Fantasy NT

The first rule of a successful fighting game is that you need an iconic, recognisable cast of characters. This is arguably *Dissidia Final Fantasy NT*'s greatest asset, having drafted an excellent 28-strong who's who of classic JRPG heroes and villains for its battles.

As a fighter *Dissidia NT* is fairly unique, its closest relative the 3D Gundam brawlers. Rather than the tightly enclosed encounters of a Street Fighter or Tekken there's instead full 3D movement across large-scale arenas and 3-on-3 battles that more closely resemble a full-blown action game. It's a smart decision that leads to over-the-top, exhilarating combat that resembles the choreographed action featured in the FF movies.

Combat is satisfying and impressively deep, though it's also difficult to understand at first. *Dissidia NT* bombards you with a complicated user interface, initially confusing mechanics and tutorials that could certainly use some extra work. It is worth slogging through those early hours, though – like the best fighters, this is extremely rewarding if you put the work in.

Despite excellent combat, Dissidia also has its struggles. It began life as an arcade-only title and featured the stripped-back feature set you'd expect as a result, but this PS4 version attempts to offer extra content for single-player fans.



DETAILS

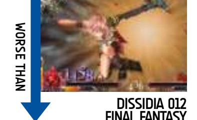
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Arcade (Japan only)
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Team Ninja
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-6 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

GUNDAM VERSUS



WORSE THAN



DISSIDIA 012 FINAL FANTASY

All of the solo offerings ultimately fall a little flat. The story mode is essentially a cutscene viewer and a few unique battles, with credits to unlock story progress earned by grinding out other fighting-focused modes both on and offline. Where the PSP Dissidia titles featured more fully fledged RPG-style character progression *NT* keeps things simple with limited unlocks and progression.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

RPG PLUS BRAWLER: While there isn't true RPG progression this time, the genre is well represented via selectable attack load-outs, summon creatures, status effect buffs, debuffs and familiar character class archetypes.

These choices make sense for the type of game this is – it's a fighting game first and Final Fantasy game second – but these are slim pickings even in comparison to other recent fighting games, and FF series fans should go in aware of that.

If you set aside expectation of what single-player offerings a FF game should have, however, *Dissidia NT* is a pretty appealing package. It features a long list of unlocks to incentivise progression, and it's here where fan service is laid on thickest. There's loads to unlock, including an excellent selection of both original and remixed FF music classics, and this is arguably a better incentive for grinding online matches than the next story unlock.

Dissidia NT is a lovingly crafted and appropriate tribute to the FF series on this, its 30th anniversary. It looks fantastic, and once it clicks it becomes a truly special game in multiplayer encounters – but it all comes with that crucial caveat in the form of its reliance on those online battles. Played offline *Dissidia NT*'s offerings of a slim story, fun but frivolous unlocks and cute fan service in abundance can only take it so far.



VERDICT 6/10

THRILLING AND FUN, BUT DEEPLY ONLINE-FOCUSED





Above: The user interface is a little overwhelming and contributes to the generally noisy feel, but every element is useful.
Right: The star-studded cast features a mix of heroes and villains from both main FF games and spin-offs.

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Where the Water Tastes Like Wine

What is life but an endless collection of stories? We are, after all, all storytellers at heart. We funnel the wealth of experience, interactions, memories and second-hand anecdotes we accumulate on a daily basis and translate them all into relatable tales. As a species, it's our way of communicating to those that exist in orbit of us, a succinct way of passing on knowledge and information with our peers and perfect strangers alike. That is to say that telling stories is an inseparable part of the human condition, perhaps the sole element of our lives that has remained consistent throughout history. It's here where Dim Bulb Games is looking to play, and where its debut adventure game *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* is looking to exploit our affection towards stories of both the factual and fictional persuasion.

This is what *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* has to offer. It's a game about everything and nothing at all; it thrives as it lets you explore the elements that helped establish famous folklore, letting you wander the great American planes collecting tales from its disparate peoples to help a devil in disguise spread twisted tales around the Western world. We don't mean that obtusely, either. The game literally opens as you're forced to make a deal with devil, sacrificing your life to aid the creature by imparting tall tales to a populous that is struggling with the realities of a crumbling American Dream – few games have captured the downtrodden feeling of Depression-era America quite as well as this one.

And so you walk. You spend your time walking from state to state, visiting cities, meeting its people and sharing your experiences. *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* sets a slow tempo to its play and embraces it wholeheartedly – it's difficult to escape the overwhelming sense of loneliness as you ramble from place to place, a state of pensive apprehension washing over you as you happen across another character with a story to tell.

It's in these interactions where you'll find the substance of the experience, short stories presented as beautifully illustrated, vignette text adventures. Each of the stories in the game takes just a few minutes to complete, many are mundane or fairly normal – though that's entirely by design. The longer you spend in the company of *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine*, the more you'll begin to find the relatively normal stories taking on an air of the unknown. You'll see it in real-time, as the subject and emphasis of tales once told twist and contort – their meaning and metaphors merging and melting away with each subsequent retelling.

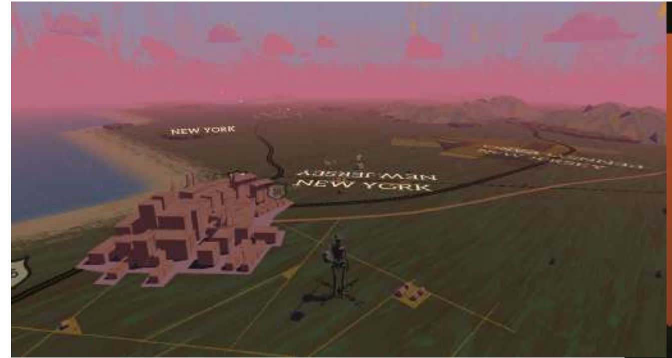
From its beginning to its end, *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* is about the folklore emanating out across the land. As you encounter other wanderers, despots and travellers in the dead of night, you'll be able to

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Dim Bulb Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



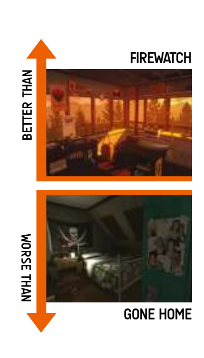
Above: *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* is a unique experience. It teeters on the edge of being a visual novel, offering just enough by the way of agency and interaction to help breathe life into its strange set-up.



Above: You can expect to find plenty of familiar voices in the game, though the best is undoubtedly that of Sting, who takes on the lead narration. It's super awesome. **Right:** While the game has a beautiful and ethereal visual style, its audio is also incredible. It's easy to lose hours to this game without realising it.

WHERE THE WATER TASTES LIKE WINE SETS A SLOW TEMPO TO ITS PLAY AND EMBRACES IT WHOLEHEARTEDLY



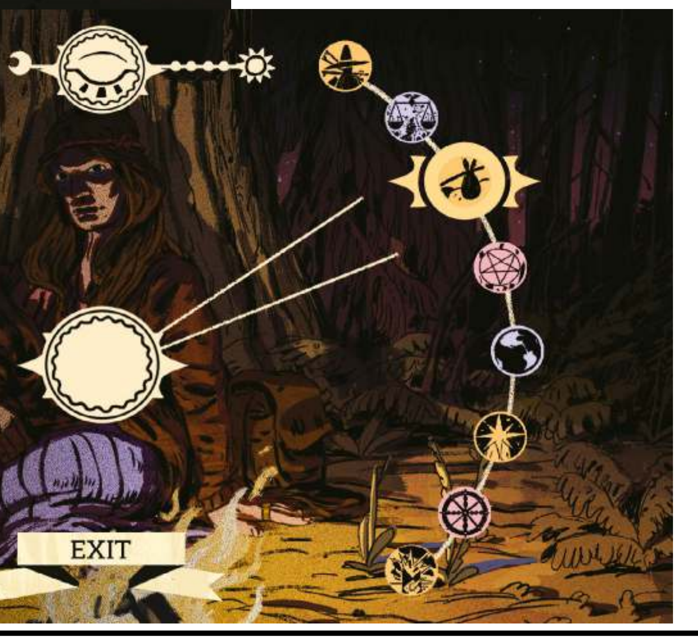


FAQs

Q. IS THIS A GAME?
It's a narrative-based adventure. Think of it like *The Oregon Trail* but with 90 per cent more exploration and reading.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
We spent over 20 hours in the company of *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine*, taking our time to explore all the game and its characters have to offer.

Q. WHO IS DIM BULB GAMES?
Founded by Johnnemann Nordhagen, co-founder of Fullbright and programmer of *Gone Home*, the game features a huge variety of writers and voice actors from across the industry.



AN ARMY OF WRITERS

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine features the work of over 20 writers. The studio went out of its way to find writers from inside and outside of the industry, each of whom brings their own unique bank of experience and expertise to the project. It means that the variety and breadth of the stories is constantly surprising, adding a real air of authenticity to the tales you encounter. There are a variety of different voices creeping in and out of the vignettes, and as you begin to piece your own versions of these stories together you'll be able to create some truly weird and wonderful expressions. It's impressive stuff, and all involved – from the writers to the editors – should be commended for their effort.

sit by the fireside and exchange your stories. Here, much like in real life, we suppose, stories transform into a currency of sorts. Each has something they would like to hear, fitting a particular tone or narrative beat, and it's your job to assemble the required pieces to tell it.

Each of the stories you collect fits a particular thematic style, presented gorgeously as tarot cards within the beautiful, painterly game world. You can have three active stories in your hand at any one time, split between suits, and once one is used in a conversation it is locked away for the remainder of that particular session. These are equipped ahead of time, used to delight and engage your listener. Should you fail, they will continue on with their journey, giving you an opportunity to explore new lands and add more stories to your arsenal before you encounter them again in some later chapter. Should you succeed in earning their trust – achieved by blurring the lines between reality and fantasy with your tales to fit a succinct narrative – they will exchange a story of their own, a tool you can later add to your arsenal to impress a stranger you'll encounter later down the beaten track.

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine is a wonderful narrative-driven experience. It's unique and rather beautiful, softening the divide between a visual novel and what would traditionally be considered a 'game'. That isn't to say that it isn't without its problems though. With over 200 stories to be collected it shouldn't surprise you to learn that a handful don't resonate as strongly as others – though the diverse and wide-ranging bank of writers the studio brought on to the project is certainly impressive and well worth celebrating, if only for the audacity of it all. Some will likely push back against the light survival mechanics that dip into overworld walking sections, where exhaustion and overexertion can temporarily stop you in your tracks; some stories may even physically injure you, leading to further complications later down the road.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WELL READ: A diverse group of writers have woven together an impressively complex narrative adventure that rarely fails to delight or impress with its ambition.

Over the 20 hours of game time and storytelling presented here though, the vast majority of it is heartfelt and engaging. Dim Bulb Games has done an exceptional job of bringing it all together, delivering an adventure game quite unlike any other. It's often captivating and incredibly empowering, a fantastic opportunity to explore the magic of storytelling in a world whose inhabitants hang on your every word.



AN EVOCATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE ART OF STORYTELLING



Above: The scale might be impressive, but once you get up high it is clear to see that this feudal China is largely big fields full of trees between similar looking settlements.



Below: Each character has a big cinematic special attack, and they're one of the few times where the visuals actually look really nice, taking out hundreds of enemies before causing a massive frame rate dip.



BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

Dynasty Warriors 9

The Dynasty Warriors games have always attracted a fair bit of criticism. For being repetitive, for being the same game with slightly sharper graphics, but these comments undermine how well refined the series had become. Each entry a hugely enjoyable hack-and-slash romp with a solid and surprisingly versatile combat system at its core – one which continues to lend itself to many licensed spin-offs, such as Dragon Quest and The Legend of Zelda.

Developer Omega Force was eager to try something different with this ninth instalment to the main series, and it has taken something of a bold step in an attempt to freshen up the formula. The familiar button-mashing battles now take place across a large open world and, oh wow, what a mistake that has been. The concept – Open World Dynasty Warriors – isn't a bad one by any means. No longer a series of arena battles, it's a huge map full of running battles in real time that you can jump into as any of your chosen historical heroes, as well as more hand-crafted story missions that progress through the Romance Of The Three Kingdoms. You unlock more playable characters, build relationships with generals on your own and enemy sides and, of course, still take on hundreds upon hundreds of enemy troops.

The problem here is that it's all so rough. Animations are awkward and limited, texture and item pop-in is a constant distraction and, if that weren't all frustrating enough, the frame rate is also all over the place – constantly up and down when you have the sheer temerity to point the camera towards a crowd of enemies. Perhaps most criminal, however, is that it's a bit boring.

There's still something thrilling about taking on an entire army all by yourself – the big battles for territory are still just the best – it's just the open world attached to it is so by the numbers. Watchtowers to climb that show nearby objectives? Check. Resource-collecting busywork as part of an item crafting system? Check. Identical quests dotted around the map? Those too. Hell, it wouldn't surprise us were we to later discover that you could swan dive into a bail of hay to avoid combat entirely. The open world is too sparse, with little means of actually leaving any meaningful impact on it. The tight arenas of the previous games are a much better fit for the constant hacking and slashing that the series has become infamous for.

Occasionally, the parts do all come together, such as when you storm across a vast plain into battle on horseback, flanked by your allies, leaping off into an attack that sends an entire platoon of enemy soldiers skyward. It's in these fleeting moments that you understand what Omega Force was trying to achieve here. Unfortunately, the execution falls well short of what we've come to expect from games of this lineage in 2018.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SIZE DOESN'T MATTER: The open world is lifeless. A sprinkling of trees here and there doesn't really cut it. Smaller but dense would be much better.



A HUGE STEP, BUT IN THE WRONG DIRECTION





PHOENIX WRIGHT MEETS PHILIP MARLOWE

A Case of Distrust

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Serenity Forge
DEVELOPER: The Wandering Ben
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2 GHz Processor, 2 GB RAM, Inten HD Graphics, 1500 MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

When a struggling private investigator gets a knock on their door – a new case landing neatly in their lap – you just know that it's never going to be as simple to solve as it may first seem. That is one of the cardinal rules of hardboiled detective fiction, a convention of which *A Case of Distrust* is well aware and to which it faithfully adheres. This is, after all, a game clearly inspired by the novels of Chandler and Hammett, full of tough-talking gangsters, corrupt cops, infidelity and shady secrets for you to untangle.

You play as former-cop-turned-detective Phyllis Malone – a reference no doubt, to Chandler's famous PI, Philip Marlowe. Investigating a threat and, before long, a murder case, you travel around a prohibition-era San Francisco to a cool Twenties-style jazz score, talking to suspects to try and pry information out of them and uncover their lies.

The investigation plays out as a blend of visual novel, point and click adventure and Phoenix Wright-style detective game. Each location has a few items in it to click on, some of which might provide evidence you can use to your advantage, and a character for you to talk to. By interrogating suspects using statements and evidence jotted down in your notebook, you can uncover new bits of information that you can later use to expose the lies of other characters and claw your way closer to the truth.



WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SAUL'S SILHOUETTES: *A Case of Distrust* uses a cool silhouetted art style linked by smooth transitions that is inspired by the work of American graphic designer and filmmaker Saul Bass.

The formula works. Coming out of an exchange of dry repartee to wipe the smile off the face of a smug gangster in vintage hardboiled fashion feels as satisfying as it should. Conversely, the game is written well enough that you'll feel a pang of guilt when grilling the game's more sympathetic characters. That's helped by the fact that the protagonist's hard edges are tempered by her empathy and vulnerability, explored through inner monologues about her experience being hounded out of the chauvinistic LAPD prior to becoming a PI. The game is thoughtful in how it deals with this subject, along with racism, wealth inequality and other issues, with which it draws parallels to our current political context. Though it could perhaps do a better job weaving them into the texture of the game's mystery, rather than leaving them feeling adjunct like floating asides.

A Case of Distrust emulates the style of the classic mystery admirably, if lacking the quotable sharpness of the genre at its finest. That punch is also absent in an underwhelming conclusion that lacks the impact the game evidently thinks it should. Still, with procedurals the pleasure is often found in the process, and that is the case here. This is a compact and compelling mystery game that makes a welcome attempt to lend us a new perspective on a familiar setting.



A STYLISH AND SATISFYING DETECTIVE ADVENTURE

BETTER THAN: HOT TIN ROOF: THE CAT THAT WORE A FEDORA

WORSE THAN: THE RED STRINGS CLUB



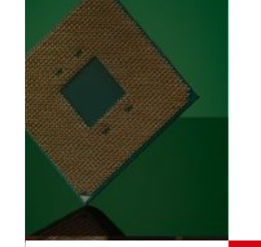
Above: Taxi rides between locations are an opportunity to hear a little bit about whatever the driver's got on their mind if you choose to do so. The game often uses these rides to explore themes like sexism and wealth inequality.







Above: It's likely that at some point you will overlook a key piece of evidence and find yourself unable to progress, but *A Case of Distrust* is short and small enough that it shouldn't be long before you find what you're looking for.



FUTURE





Introducing



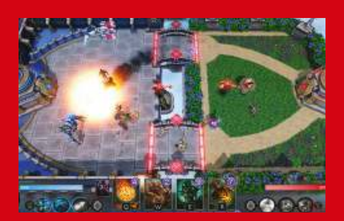
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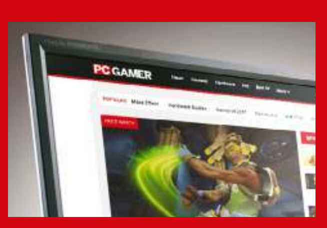
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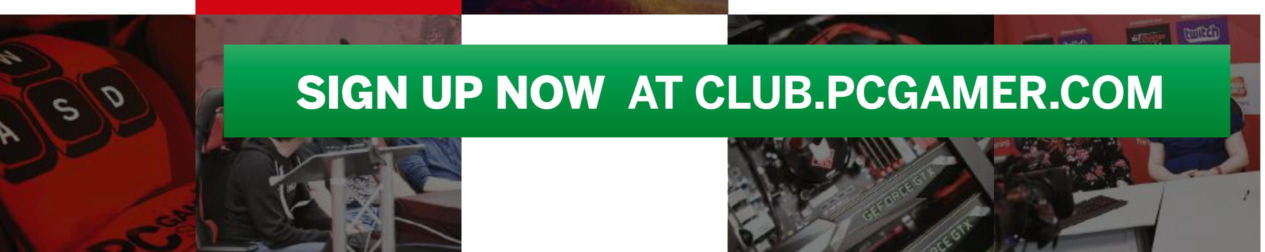
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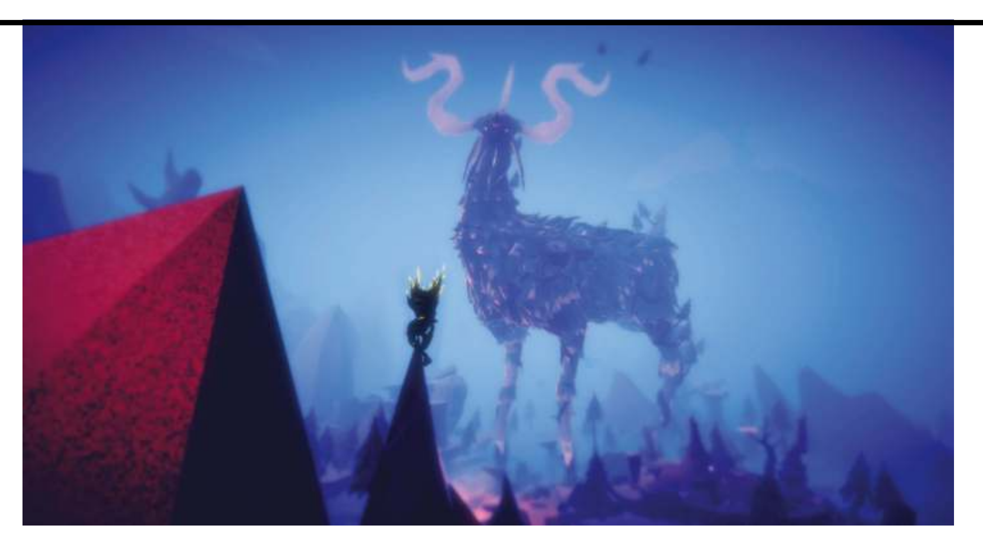
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SING TO THE FOREST, SCREAM FROM FRUSTRATION

Fe

Harmony is meant to be at the heart of *Fe*. Sing to the animals of the forest to bond with them in this action-adventure game and use their abilities to stop the mysterious Silent Ones. It doesn't get much more wholesome than that. Yet even though the world is a bewitching, colourful menagerie, *Fe* is more likely to leave you frustrated than enthralled.

Pairing up with the creatures of the forest on your travels is undeniably uplifting, thanks to the gentle crooning that you control with R2. Finding just the right pitch requires the most delicate of touches, making you feel how precarious the balance of nature is with every gentle tap of the trigger. Magic seeps through the design of Fe's world too, its stylised colour scheme making it easy to read environmental cues to find the bits you'll need to solve its simple puzzles.

Don't expect a clear take on good and bad, either. Hidden away among the enigmatic ruins is the story of the Silent Ones, which has you literally seeing through the eyes of one of your foes. Walking around in their shoes is unexpectedly sympathetic, turning them from shallow environmental upsetters into a far more intriguing entity.

Yet despite *Fe*'s good intentions, moving through the world isn't as smooth as it should be... which doesn't exactly make you feel in harmony with your surroundings. One light touch of the analogue stick when you're in mid-air will send you on a wild trajectory that you almost certainly didn't intend, and the same goes for gliding. Whenever you lift off from a tree (something that you'll be doing very often, by the way), start to glide and you'll find yourself suddenly pushed to one side by the sensitive controls, which will send you careering off course while you try to reorient yourself.

Because you spend most of your time jumping or gliding, this gripe soon gets incredibly irritating. You'll be moving around a lot, too, thanks to the lack of clues about how to solve the puzzles. Yes, hints are drawn on nearby rocks... but so are depictions of *Fe*'s backstory, so it's tricky to tell one from another. Though the lack of hand holding encourages you to explore its stunning setting, at times you'll feel a little bit too alone, wishing you could just ask for help using, you know, words.

Fe's majestic world makes up for the smaller grumbles that will inevitably emerge from your mouth during your time with it. Not quite making a jump to a moving tree will have you screaming one minute, but the next you'll be admiring the animals darting through the undergrowth. But it's not quite the carefree experience it could be, and its frustrations could even have you siding with the Silent Ones.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Switch, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Zoink
PRICE: £17.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

YOOKA LAYLEE



WORSE THAN



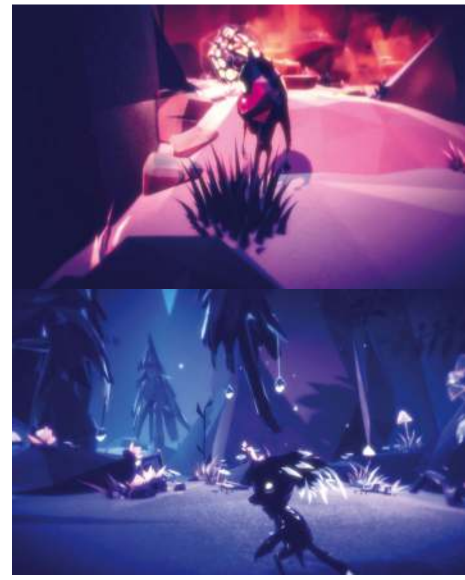
EVERYTHING

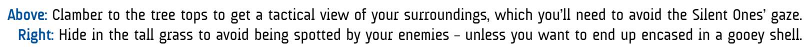
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SING ALONG: To bond with animals and use their skills, growl, chirp or howl at them using R2 at an incredibly precise pitch. Hope you've got a delicate trigger finger...

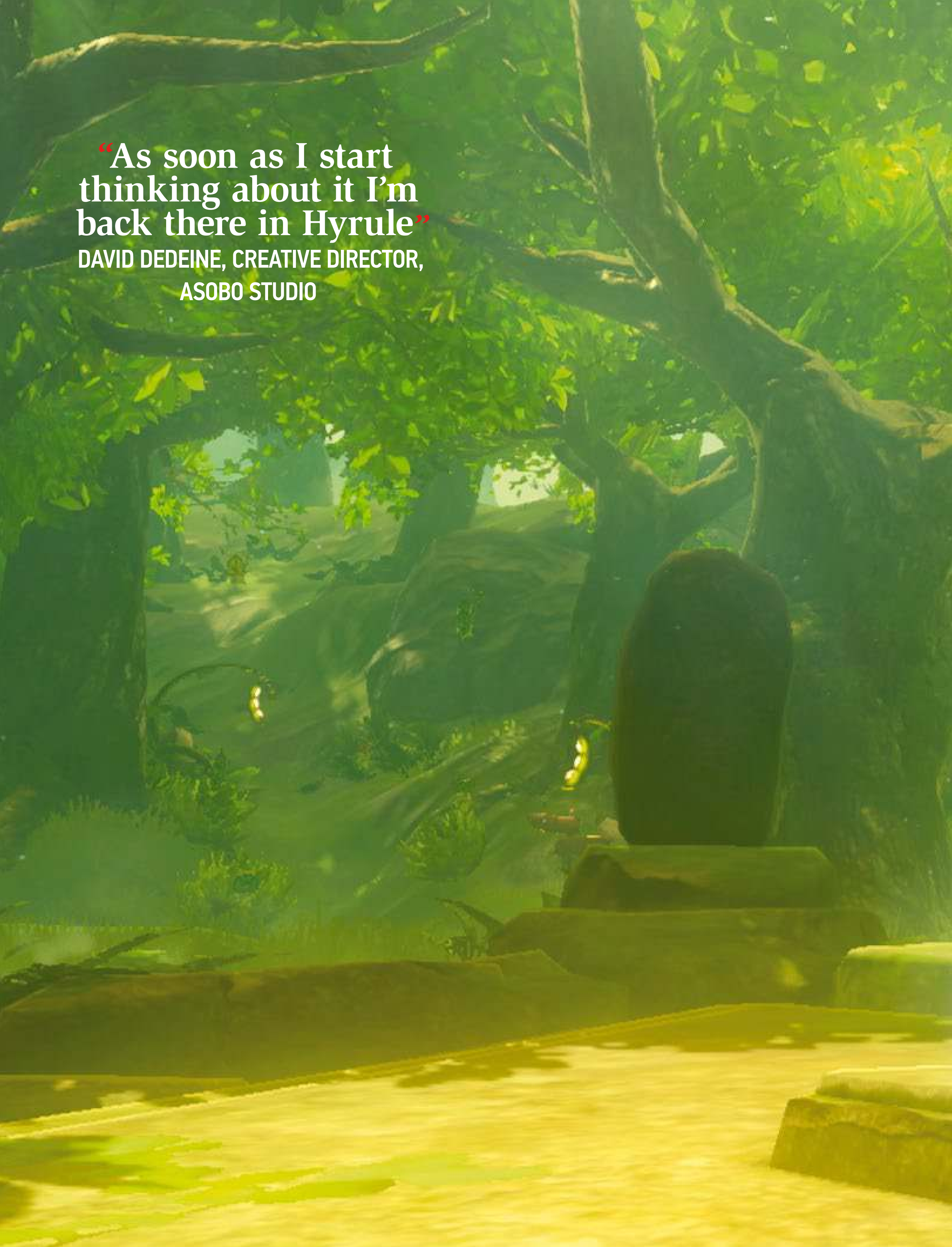
VERDICT 6/10
A BEAUTIFUL WORLD MARRED BY IRRITATING CONTROLS





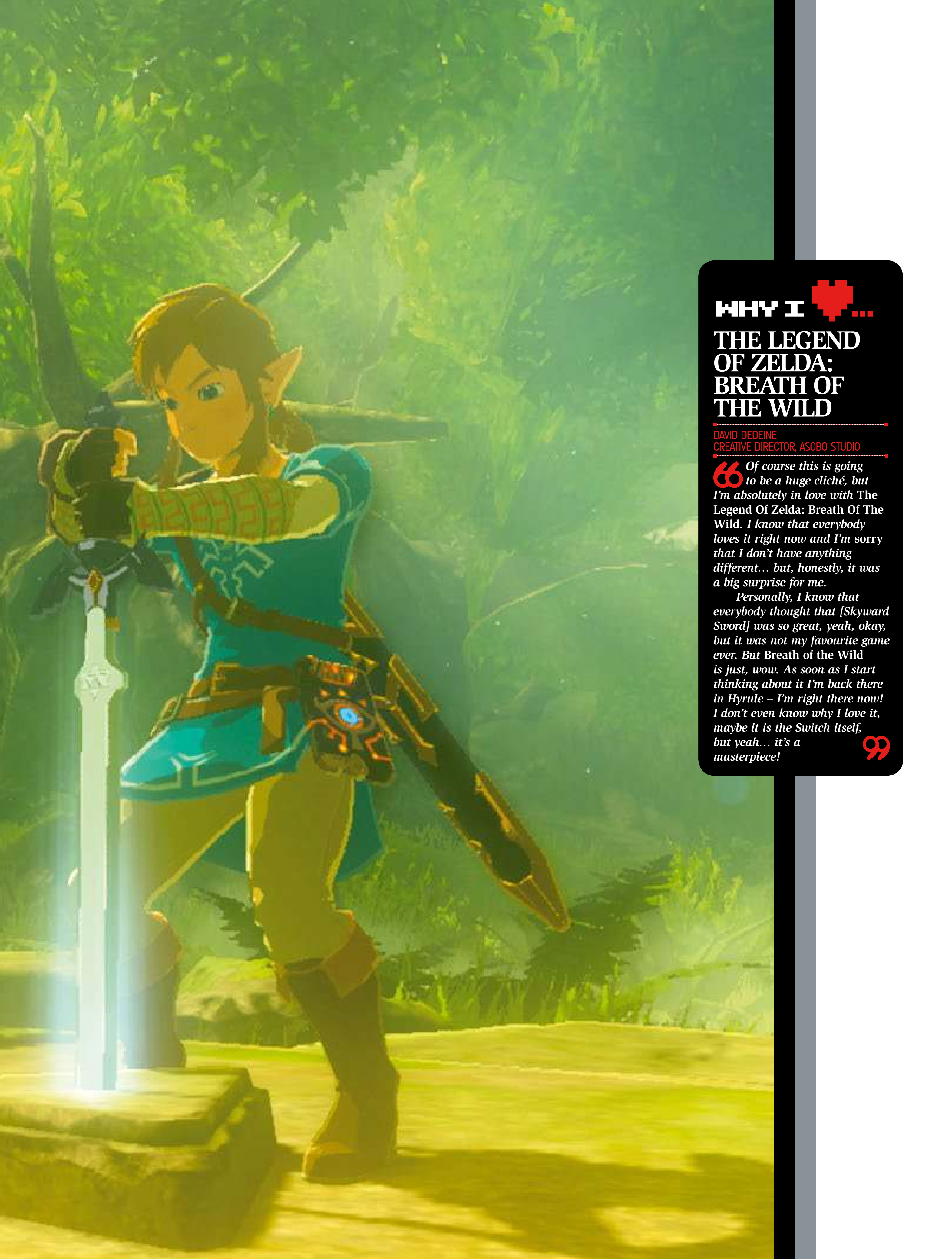


Above: Clamber to the tree tops to get a tactical view of your surroundings, which you'll need to avoid the Silent Ones' gaze.
Right: Hide in the tall grass to avoid being spotted by your enemies – unless you want to end up encased in a gooey shell.



“As soon as I start thinking about it I’m back there in Hyrule”

DAVID DEDEINE, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, ASOBO STUDIO



WHY I ♥...

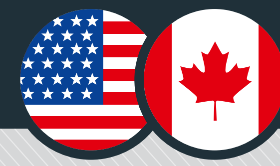
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

DAVID DEDEINE
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, ASOBO STUDIO

Of course this is going to be a huge cliché, but I'm absolutely in love with The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild. *I know that everybody loves it right now and I'm* sorry *that I don't have anything different… but, honestly, it was a big surprise for me.*

Personally, I know that everybody thought that [Skyward Sword] was so great, yeah, okay, but it was not my favourite game ever. But Breath of the Wild *is just, wow. As soon as I start thinking about it I'm back there in Hyrule – I'm right there now! I don't even know why I love it, maybe it is the Switch itself, but yeah… it's a masterpiece!*

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RETRO

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... COMMODORE 64

It may not have been designed as a games machine, but games dominated the C64 and turned it into a fertile breeding ground for modern developers. Here, we revisit some of its greatest releases



COMMODORE'S 8-BIT HOME computer made a huge impact when it landed in 1982. The company was no stranger to the 8-bit market, having already released systems like the Commodore Pet and VIC-20, but Commodore's owner, Jack Tramiel, wanted to dominate the market, and he aggressively marketed the C64, cutting its price by $200 a few months after its release, as well as using a casing that was extremely similar to the C64's predecessor, the Commodore VIC-20.

The C64 may have looked extremely similar to the humble VIC-20, but there were huge differences beneath the bread bin-like exterior. For starters, it featured a whopping 64 KB of RAM with an additional 20 KB of ROM, better resolution and incredible sound thanks to the SID (sound interface device) chip, which allowed talented musicians like Rob Hubbard and Ben Daglish to create incredible tunes.

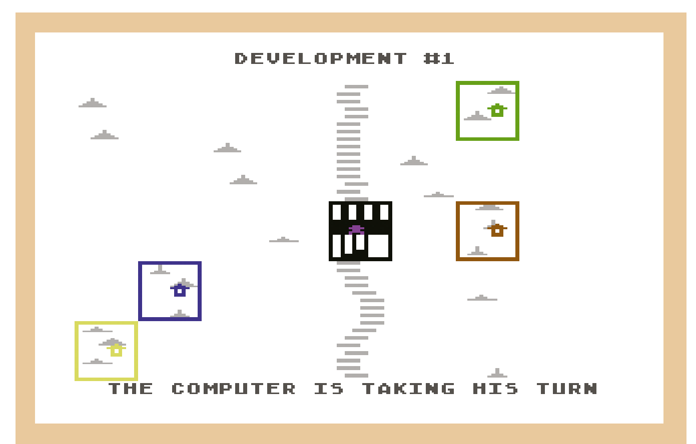
The Commodore would eventually go on to shift over 30 million units, making it the best-selling home micro of its time. It might not have been designed as a pure games machine, but that's what it's arguably best remembered for. So here are some of the finest games the C64 has to offer. If you've ever considered collecting for it then these titles are the perfect place to start.



ARCHON: THE LIGHT AND THE DARK 1983

ELECTRONIC ARTS

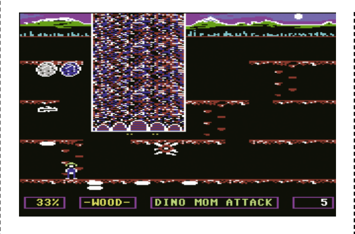
If you glanced at *Archon* really quickly you'd probably mistake it for an ugly game of chess. Look past its basic visuals, however, and you'll discover a surprisingly gripping strategy game where fantastical monsters battle each other to control five strategic power points in order to win the game. Alternatively, you can simply eliminate all your opponent's creatures, which is much more satisfying.



M.U.L.E. 1983

ELECTRONIC ARTS

Like several early C64 games, *M.U.L.E.* started off on Atari's 8-bit range. Taking place on the planet Irata (Atari spelt backwards), you must use your M.U.L.E. (Multiple Use Labour Element) to harvest various resources, all of which can potentially impact on your turn in some fashion. The AI puts up a good fight, but it's best played with friends.



DINO EGGS 1983

MICRO FUN

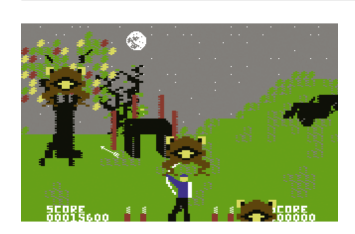
This platformer is surprisingly complex, but no less enjoyable for it. Playing a time traveller, you must collect dinosaur eggs to transport back to your present time to earn points. Rocks must be pushed away to uncover eggs (and hit nearby enemies), and you also need to build a fire to fend off the mother dinosaur, who shows up by way of a gigantic stomping foot.

DROPZONE 1984

US GOLD

This scintillating shooter from Archer Maclean may have liberally burrowed elements from *Defender* (even the font is the same), but it retains its own identity. Taking control of a jetpack-wearing hero, you zip across Jupiter's moon, picking up scientists while avoiding numerous enemies. It's the perfect twitch shooter.



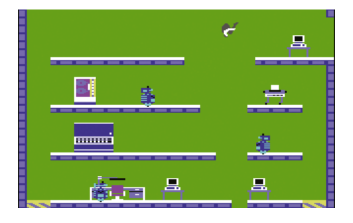


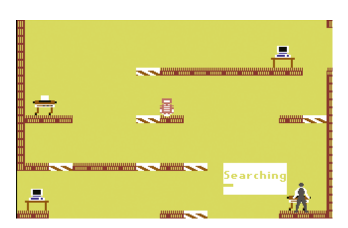


FORBIDDEN FOREST 1983

COSMI CORPORATION

This early offering from Paul Norman features huge animated sprites, excellent parallax scrolling, cool pseudo sprite scaling and even day and night cycles. It's not the prettiest game in the world, but it's exceptionally atmospheric and creates a building sense of dread as the later enemies (which range from giant spiders to dragons and demogorgons) come at you thick and fast. Despite the danger, you only have a limited number of arrows, so you need to make every shot count.





IMPOSSIBLE MISSION 1984

EPYX

Elvin Atombender's taunting voice during the game's opening sounds a little less ominous nowadays, but Dennis Caswell's platformer is still exceedingly compelling to play. The aim is to infiltrate Atombender's lair by dodging robots and searching numerous pieces of furniture and machinery for the missing code pieces that must be assembled so you can shut down the computer in Atombender's control room. A sequel was released in 1988.



PARADROID POWER

Andrew Braybrook on his inventive 8-bit shooter

Paradroid successfully combines two distinct genres. Did you purposely try to create something different?
I always followed my nose, trying to design a game that I would enjoy playing. I was more interested in using the technology to do something new. I would start with building the scrolling system and see what dropped out. This game was designed almost overnight as I walked home. I wrote down all the ideas I wanted to incorporate on one sheet of paper and all of those ideas went in.

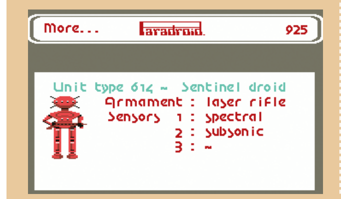
Where did _Paradroid_'s droid-swapping originate?
I think the idea germinated from an arcade game we used to play where you played a commando who could leap into a tank and use it. When it got hit you had a couple of seconds to leap out before it blew up, and then you could go and find another tank. I quite liked the two different states and that you were protected by the tank. Having decided on the radar-style display for the robots, I could save all the complex graphical images for all the directions of movement. It also allowed a greater variety of weapons, though it wasn't expressed fully until *Paradroid 90*. I understand that a number of games have used a similar system since, so it must be quite appealing.

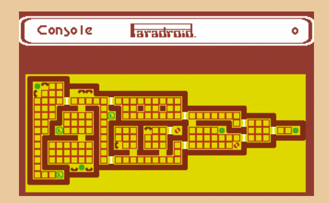
What was the reasoning behind the update, _Heavy Metal Paradroid_?
I was writing *Morpheus*, and

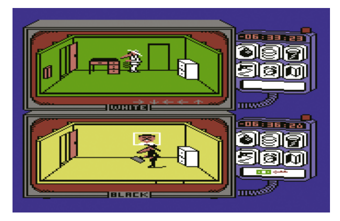


had a 'curved metal' graphical look that I had concocted in a graphics editor. It was early days for the game, and I didn't have a game system to experiment with, so I decided to substitute the *Paradroid* background graphics with the *Morpheus* ones. I had taken delivery of a Commodore 128, and one of the features was that you could switch the CPU into double-speed mode while the raster was off the screen, which bought about 30 per cent more processing time. So I wanted to get *Paradroid*'s scrolling a bit smoother. It turned out that I could get it running smoother even on a Commodore 64, and I really liked the new graphical look, so we did a new turbo loader and re-released *Paradroid*.

Why do you think _Paradroid_ remains so popular with gamers?
I guess that everyone gets something different from a game. Maybe that's it. *Paradroid* is a very dynamic game; even though each ship is set up broadly the same, it is running everything on each deck as you arrive so it plays differently every time. As a player, you also have a great deal of freedom as to how to tackle the ship as a whole and each deck individually.







SPY VS SPY 1984

FIRST STAR SOFTWARE

■ This adaptation of the *Mad Magazine* comic strip is an essential multiplayer experience. Your aim is to collect a set amount of items and make your way to an awaiting plane before your opponent does. While you can delay your rival spy by taking part in niggly hand-to-hand combat, it's far more fun to lay traps for the poor bugger instead. Several sequels followed.

WINTER GAMES 1985

EPYX

■ Epyx's sequel to *Summer Games* cashed in on the Winter Olympics that had happened the previous year. While the figure skating is a little lame, the remaining seven events are all entertaining and include a diverse range of events like bobsled, ski jumping and the energy-sapping biathlon. It caters for up to eight players if you can find enough friends.



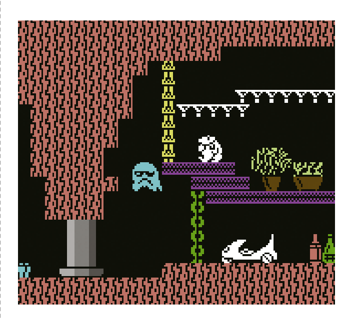




THE PAWN 1985

RAINBIRD

■ Although graphic adventures truly shone on the 16-bit home computers, this absorbing offering from Magnetic Scrolls is certainly worth playing on the humble C64. While the artwork is of an incredibly high standard, it's the clever story, entertaining characters and fun writing that keeps you playing. Thank goodness the internet exists, though, as it's not easy at times.



MONTY ON THE RUN 1985

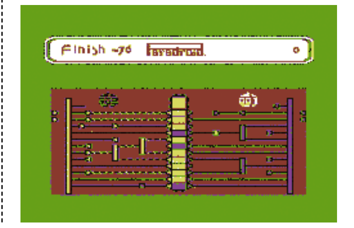
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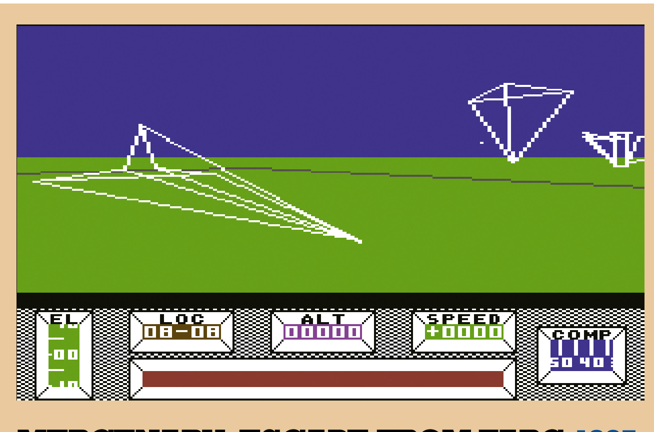
■ If you want your ears to love you forever then make sure they listen to the entirety of Rob Hubbard's astonishing soundtrack, particularly the main theme. Inspired by Devil's Galop, it's a ridiculously catchy tune that slowly builds in pace until it becomes impossible to stop humming along to. Oh, and the game's alright as well…

PARADROID 1985

HEWSON

■ Andrew Braybrook's *Paradroid* is an engaging blaster that combines his love of arcade shooters with something a little more thought-provoking. Playing as a lowly defence droid, you must make your way around the huge levels by hacking more powerful droids (via a neat minigame) and taking control of them. Interestingly, rather than simply try to aim for a high score, you can attempt to gain control of the unstable 999 droid for a more satisfying challenge.



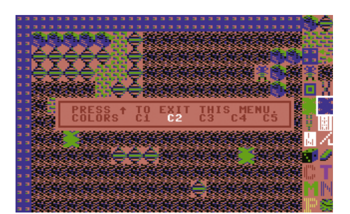


MERCENARY: ESCAPE FROM TARG 1985

NOVAGEN

Few games left a first impression like *Mercenary*. Famed at the time for its smart vector and polygonal graphics and its dynamic, open-ended gameplay, it has sadly gone on to outlive its creator, the private Paul Woakes. *Mercenary* still holds up well today, and was succeeded by two 16-bit-based sequels, *Damocles* and *Mercenary III*.





BOULDER DASH CONSTRUCTION KIT 1985

FIRST STAR SOFTWARE

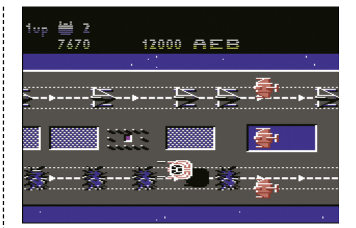
You don't realise how hard it is to create videogames until you use something like Peter Liepa's excellent level designer to make your own. In addition to being very simple to use (everything is icon driven), it also comes with additional caves and intermission screens to plough through, meaning you'll be entertained for absolutely ages. You're only limited by your imagination.

BOUNDER 1986

GREMLIN GRAPHICS

This quirky little offering from Christian Shrigley and Andrew Green is one of those joyously crazy concepts that could have only been thought up in the Eighties. Playing as a tennis ball, you must make your way through a continually scrolling stage bouncing on grey slabs while avoiding everything else. It's not easy at first, but you soon get into the swing of things, as you constantly look out for teleporters, jump bonuses and other useful power-ups.

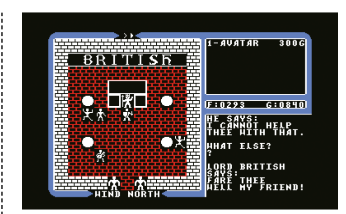




URIDIUM 1986

HEWSON CONSULTANTS

More arcade-inspired brilliance from Andrew Braybrook. While *Uridium* made it to several other 8-bit home computers, it truly shone on the Commodore 64. It boasts super-slick scrolling as your Manta zips above the huge ships, shooting down enemies and avoiding installations. It's fast and furious, and you'll need more than a little luck to reach the final stage. Interestingly, it also crops up on the NES with modified graphics as a *The Last Starfighter* tie-in.





ULTIMA IV: QUEST OF THE AVATAR 1986

ORIGIN SYSTEMS

There are several Ultima games on Commodore's machine, but the fourth outing is arguably the best in terms of its accessibility and structure. It shifts away from the simple combat-based dungeon-crawling elements of the earlier games in order to deliver an adventure that's rich with narrative nuance.



LEADERBOARD GOLF 1986

US GOLD

The courses can take a little while to load, but *Leaderboard* still plays a mean round of golf. It's largely down to the beautifully refined swing mechanic that gives you a surprising amount of control over the ball, but it's also because of the exceptionally designed stages.



MANIAC MANSION 1987

LUCASFILM GAMES

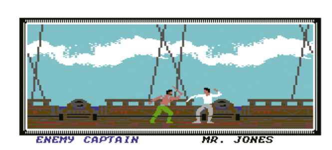
Ron Gilbert's innovative point-and-click adventure is still hilariously entertaining to play today. The first game to use the popular SCUMM engine is full of humour, has an array of zany characters to meet and turns a lot of typical adventure conventions on their heads. A sequel would appear six years later in the form of Tim Schafer's *Day Of The Tentacle*.

SID MEIER'S PIRATES 1987

MICROPROSE

■ The first game to bear the Sid Meier moniker would indicate the quality you could expect from his later releases. It remains an enthralling open-world game that splices different genres and playing styles together while utilising a dynamic playing field that continually offers the player new choices as play progresses.







BARBARIAN: THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR 1987

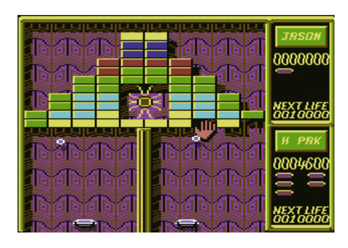
PALACE SOFTWARE

■ While its cover featuring a skimpily Maria Whittaker and Wolf from *Gladiators* drew controversy from anxious parents, *Barbarian*'s content was even more graphic. The blood that gushes fourth from the wounds you receive might look a little tame now, but the game-ending decapitation of your opponent remains just as effective. The controls are great, too, and you're able to pull off a surprising amount of moves via just one fire button.

BATTY 1987

ELITE

■ Although *Batty* is an *Arkanoid* clone, it's a far better one than most. This is mainly down to its excellent two-player mode, which turns it into a truly entertaining multiplayer effort. Your bat is extremely responsive, and there's a great selection of power-ups to discover, while the wall layouts are challenging but never unfair.

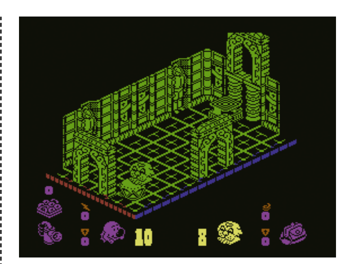


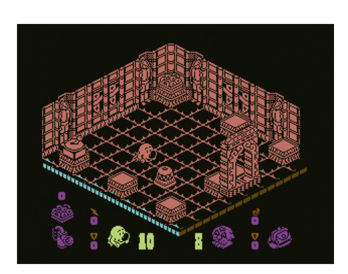


BUBBLE BOBBLE 1987

FIREBIRD

■ We didn't want to fill this list with arcade ports, but there are several that deserve your attention. *Bubble Bobble* is certainly one of them, offering surprisingly authentic-looking visuals, a joyously bouncy rendition of the theme tune and seemingly intact gameplay. Blowing bubbles to trap enemies and then bursting them for points sounds simple, but it gets surprisingly tough on the later stages.





HEAD OVER HEELS 1987

OCEAN SOFTWARE

■ Ignore the poor visuals and sluggish speed, as *Head Over Heels* remains an astoundingly good isometric adventure. Jon Ritman's game is full of charm and fiendishly designed stages, and is amplified by Bernie Drummond's excellent pixel work and odd creations. It's an adventure just getting the two alien agents together, and then the real fun begins.





CALIFORNIA GAMES 1987

EPYX

■ It may have a paltry selection of events, but *California Games* is superb fun all the same. All six events (which include surfing, roller skating, half-pipe, footbag, BMX and flying disc) play to a high standard, and have super-responsive controls. Epyx's game looks great too thanks to bright and colourful visuals that capture the carefree atmosphere of the Sunshine State.

IT MAY HAVE A PALTRY SELECTION OF EVENTS, BUT CALIFORNIA GAMES IS SUPERB FUN ALL THE SAME



IK+ 1987

SYSTEM 3

■ Who would have thought simply adding a third fighter would create such a different fighting experience? Archer Maclean did, and when he wasn't tracing over characters from *Grease* so he could create that signature flip move, he was coding some gritty fight mechanics, improving earlier minigames and adding all sorts of cool visual treats in the background.

WIZBALL 1987
OCEAN SOFTWARE

■ *Wizball* was the killer combination of Chris Yates' coding, Jon Hare's wonderfully stylistic visuals and an explosive soundtrack by Martin Galway. Charged with restoring colour to Wizworld, you must navigate each stage, shooting down enemies and using your familiar, Catellite, to collect the coloured droplets of paint they leave behind. A surprisingly strategic blaster that simply oozes atmosphere.





BUGGY BOY 1987
ELITE SOFTWARE

■ Many consider Elite's version of *Buggy Boy* to be one of the best arcade conversions on Commodore's machine. While coder Dave Thomas couldn't replicate the three-screen panoramic display of the original arcade cockpit version, he did maintain the game's sheer speed and chaotic sense of fun. He even managed to include every level from the arcade original, too.

GREAT GIANA SISTERS 1987
RAINBOW ARTS

■ It's not hard to see why Nintendo worked so aggressively to get *Great Giana Sisters* off store shelves. It has enough interesting ideas of its own, but it's clearly an incredibly impressive clone of *Super Mario Bros* on the NES. Its scarcity now means it goes for good money.

DEFENDER OF THE CROWN 1987
CINEMAWARE

■ Cinemaware's first release may have been designed to showcase the power of the Commodore Amiga, but the C64 version is no slouch, either. Like *Pirates!*, it offers plenty of different gameplay variations to keep you busy, but at its core is a pleasingly deep strategy game topped off by great presentation.





KIKSTART 2 1987
MASTERONIC

■ Shaun Southern's sequel greatly improves on his original 1985 offering. The speedometer and enhanced controls make it far easier to control your biker, while the 24 stages offer plenty of challenge. It's all topped off by an entertaining course editor. And to think this cost just £2…

ALIENS 1987
ELECTRIC DREAMS

■ We've steered away from film licences, but we did want to mention this solid adaptation by Electric Dreams. It utilises a first-person viewpoint to put you in the quaking shoes of the various marines to tremendous effect.





THE LAST NINJA 2 1988

SYSTEM 3

■ System 3 was a powerhouse on the C64, and the second part of its highly regarded trilogy is arguably its best game. The controls feel generally improved over the original 1987 adventure, the map design and visuals are more ambitious, and there's an atmospheric soundtrack from Matt Gray. The final game arguably ups the graphics ante, but *Last Ninja 2* is a more balanced adventure.

KATAKIS 1988

RAINBOW ARTS

■ *Katakis* is such a good take on *R-Type* that Activision (the licence holder of the home ports) threatened infringement unless Factor 5 coded its Amiga port of R-type. The team agreed, and Commodore owners enjoyed a game far better than the official port (which was also coded by *Katakis*' coder, Manfred Trenz).

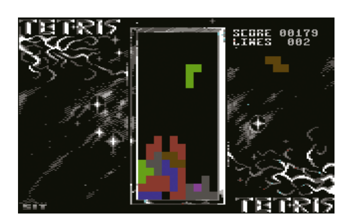


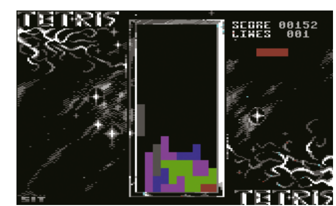
MICROPROSE SOCCER 1988

MICROPROSE

■ We were torn between this and *Match Day II*, but Sensible Software's game was indeed the sensible choice. Despite the association with simulator experts Microprose, this is a fast-paced arcade take on football that actually features both traditional matches and six-a-side affairs, and has plenty of tournaments to get stuck into. It would be refined in the form of *Sensible Soccer*.







TETRIS 1988

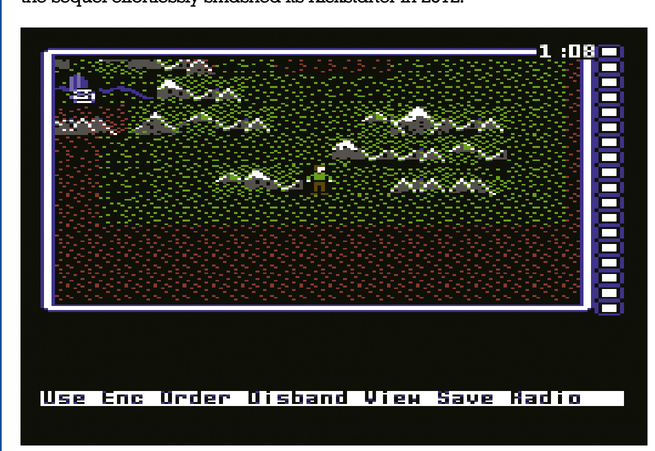
MIRRORSOFT

■ While Alexey Pajitnov's game isn't the prettiest-looking thing in the world, it has lost none of its infuriatingly addictive gameplay from moving across to the Commodore 64. It's also blessed by an excellent audio track by Wally Beben that nicely complements the increasingly hectic action.

WASTELAND 1988

ELECTRONIC ARTS

■ We were torn between this and The Bard's Tale series (also by Interplay), but the apocalyptic RPG wins out because it still feels so fresh compared to other similar RPGs. Its game world still feels exciting to play in, while there's a large number of monsters and NPCs to interact with. Little wonder the sequel effortlessly smashed its Kickstarter in 2012.





ARMALYTE 1988

THALAMUS

■ The publishing arm of Newsfield Publications released some extremely popular games on the C64, but this scintillating shooter from Cyberdyne Systems is easily our favourite. There's a good range of power-ups to enjoy, the stage and wave design is challenging, but never overwhelming, while the bosses are fantastically satisfying to take down.

TURBO OUTRUN 1989

US GOLD

■ The home computer ports of *Outrun* were largely despised, but US Gold redeemed itself with its sequel by handing coding duties to Probe Software. The end result is an annoying multiload, but it's also one of the most satisfying arcade racers on the system. Steve Crow's graphics look fantastic, too.

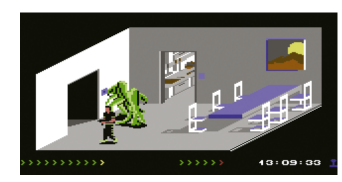


PROJECT FIRESTART 1989

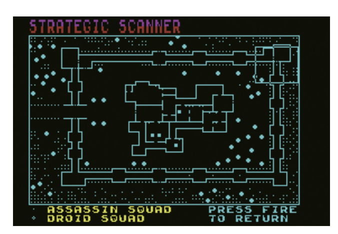
ELECTRONIC ARTS

■ This tense cinematic adventure game riffs off *Aliens* and has a neat survival horror vibe to it. While there's plenty of action, you're often outgunned, so you need to use your brains as well as your shooting skills to succeed. Checking terminals reveal a back story to your investigations, which felt revolutionary back in 1989.









LASER SQUAD 1989

BLADE SOFTWARE

It may have taken an additional year to reach Commodore 64 owners, but Julian Gollop's Spectrum strategy hit was worth the wait. Successfully equipping and positioning your team is just as important as the turn-based gameplay, while the detailed missions are full of variety and powered by a slick menu-driven command system.



KLAX 1990

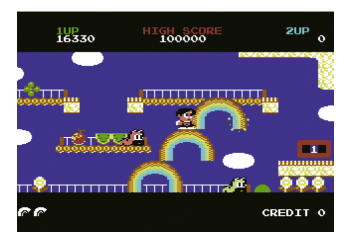
DOMARK

Based on the hit arcade game, *Klax* requires you to collect tiles as they fall off a moving escalator and dump them into a bucket in order to score points. It's a simple concept, but works exceptionally well, and becomes very difficult to stop playing. Sadly, it lacks the arcade's two-player mode.

RAINBOW ISLANDS 1990

OCEAN SOFTWARE

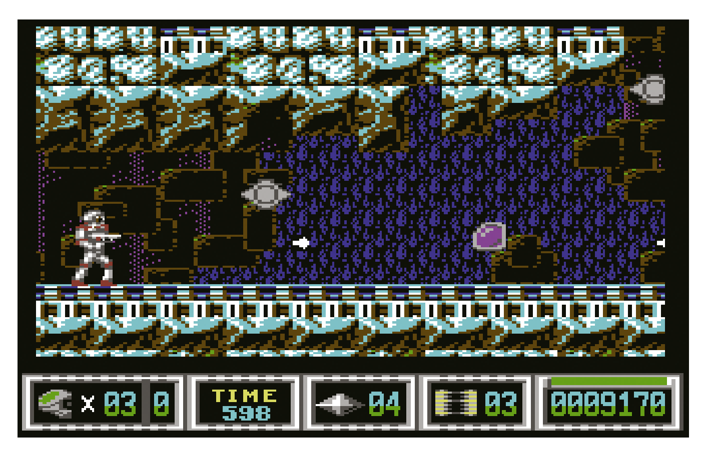
More arcade perfection, this time in the form of Graftgold's excellent conversion of Taito's *Bubble Bobble* sequel. While all of the 8-bit home conversions are good, the C64 offering is a step above them thanks to super-smooth scrolling, great music and excellent-looking cartoon-like visuals. It's missing three islands, but remains a remarkable achievement.



TURRICAN II: THE FINAL FIGHT 1991

RAINBOW ARTS

Focus may have been moving over to the 16-bit systems by the early Nineties, but coders like Manfred Trenz were still delivering magic on the C64. *Turrican II* is a fine example, and it improves on the original in every way with better level design and well-designed bosses. Console versions exist in the form of a tie-in to *Universal Soldier*.





INTERNATIONAL TENNIS 1992

ZEPPELIN GAMES

There's a lot of content in this budget tennis game. You can play in a single match or tournament, it's possible to pull off a surprising range of different shots, and you can play on numerous courts. The animation throughout is fantastic too, and the collision detecting is fair, allowing for some great volleys.

FIRST SAMURAI 1992

IMAGE WORKS

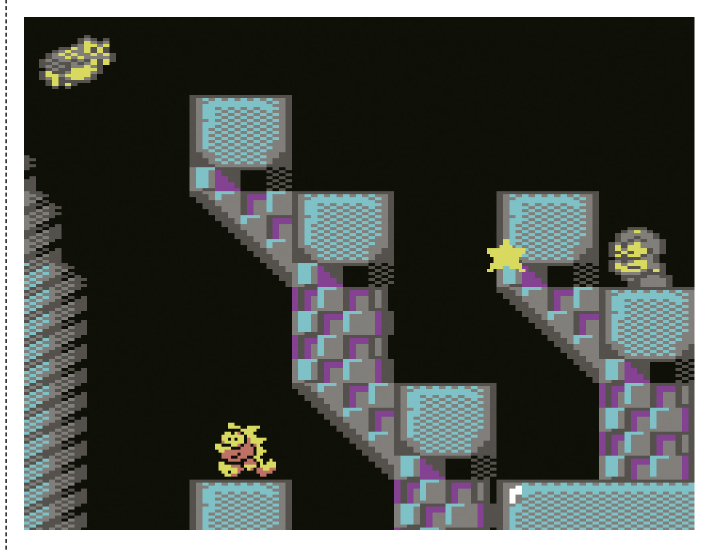
Like many later C64 games, *First Samurai* pushed the machine to its limits, delivering amazing-looking visuals that would have been thought impossible a decade earlier. The game itself is highly entertaining, if a little difficult due to the endlessly respawning enemies. Stick with it though, as it's a sprawling adventure with lots to do.



MAYHEM IN MONSTERLAND 1993

APEX COMPUTER PRODUCTIONS

11 years after the Commodore 64 first launched, John and Steve Rowlands released their finest game for the aging home computer. Not only does it look astonishing (you could imagine it appearing on the NES or Master System), it has the tight controls to match, delivering a rich platforming experience that puts many similar games on the C64 to shame.



MORE C64 CLASSICS TO CONSIDER

- ZAXXON 1984 SYNAPSE SOFTWARE
- RAID ON BUNGELING BAY 1984 BRØDERBUND
- GUNSHIP 1986 MICROPROSE
- SKATE OF DIE! 1987 ELECTRONIC ARTS
- PROJECT STEALTH FIGHTER 1987 MICROPROSE
- ZAK MCKRACKEN AND THE ALIEN MINDBENDERS 1988 LUCASFILM GAMES
- POOL OF RADIANCE 1988 STRATEGIC SIMULATIONS INC
- STUNT CAR RACER 1989 MICROSTYLE
- SUPREMACY 1991 MELBOURNE HOUSE

BEHIND THE SCENES

SYPHON FILTER

Remembered for its deft blend of stealth and action, plus the ability to set enemies alight with a taser, Syphon Filter holds a special place in the hearts of many PlayStation fans. We explore the struggles that its developers endured just to make the PS1 classic happen…

Released: 1999
Format: PlayStation
Publisher: 989 Studios
Key Staff: Richard Ham (Design lead), John Garvin (Designer/Art Lead), Christopher Reese (Programming lead), Darren Yager (Design), Marc Blank (Executive producer)

THE GAMES INDUSTRY IS RIFE WITH EXAMPLES OF HEROIC PERSEVERANCE. There's a particularly cruel challenge in creating interactive entertainment, as developers struggle not only with the constantly evolving and expanding capabilities of the hardware of the time, but figure out how to make all these moving parts work seamlessly and effectively while making something that everyone's personal tastes and varying skills can appreciate. And while some developers find resistance in the widespread acceptance of their novel or untested ideas, others find it in the frustrations of bending computers to their will to simply enable all-new gameplay functions and styles.

The story of *Syphon Filter* began by having to face both these issues, while its developer, Eidetic, also had to overcome the unfortunate reputation of its debut game: *Bubsy 3D*. "*Bubsy* didn't work out as well as we had hoped," says Richard Ham, who had started as a junior designer to work on the ill-fated project. "It had the very, very bad luck of launching within a few months of *Mario 64*, which just has to go down in history as one of the most poorly timed launches of all time."

Bubsy 3D was one of a handful of high definition PS1 games, but that was about the only thing that stood out as a positive. *Super Mario 64* destroyed Eidetic's first game, which was incidentally the collective team's first ever attempt at 3D gaming. *Super Mario 64* made the flaws of the studio's first ever title stand out all the more. "Ultimately, it went on to be named the worst videogame of all time by *EGM*," recalls Ham, at least lighthearted about it now. Despite this setback, the developer could do nothing but soldier on, even if that had become quite a struggle as a result of *Bubsy 3D*'s dismal reputation.

I WANTED TO CREATE A JOHN WOO EXPERIENCE ON A CONSOLE, BECAUSE THAT WASN'T SOMETHING THAT ANYONE HAD EVER EXPERIENCED AT THE TIME



The opening stage of *Syphon Filter* could easily be one of the best of the generation, and perfectly encapsulates what the game is about.



The basis for level locales came from designer Richard Ham, but it was John Garvin, art director and writer on the game, that pinned it all together.

"While we had hoped there would be a Bubsy 4D that we were working on, that got cancelled before it even got started. So we had to go on the road trying to find a new publisher, because we had a fully functioning 3D PlayStation engine that worked pretty well, could push a decent number of polys, and we actually had a really, really nice prototype for Bubsy 4." Eidetic soon discovered it was quite the task to find anyone to publish their next game, whether that was Bubsy or something else completely new. The name preceded them, and it made things rather hard for the studio to find a willing partner.

Ultimately, it was a branch of Sony that would take a chance on Eidetic "when pretty much nobody else would". But this wasn't for Bubsy 4, or even for a new concept from the developer. Instead, this was a project that 989 Studios – which would go on to be the name of this Sony publisher – was already looking to get developed. "They had, on the books, this project called *Syphon Filter* and they needed a developer for it. There were some in-house producers that were really keen on it, and a had one-page synopsis."

This initial game had very little attached to it – no gameplay, no real concept, just the name and a "very weird setting". It was at this point, shortly after Eidetic took control of *Syphon Filter*, that Michael Berlyn – one of the co-founders of Eidetic – decided to leave the company and the videogames industry entirely, leaving space for Ham to come in as lead designer after surviving "a trial by fire" on *Bubsy 3D*.

"*Syphon Filter* was a very, very weird project when Sony came to us," he says, explaining the initial concept of the game. "I don't know the whole background, but apparently, within Sony, it had been pitched as kind of a Final Fantasy setting, in that it's kind of medieval, it's kind of in the future, it's in the past. You know, more modern Final Fantasys, where you can't really peg what they are. It was a setting like that, in a world where the planet had decided to get rid of the virus of humanity, shove it off it's back. Basically humanity went through some kind of apocalypse, and thousands of years into the future the last pockets of humanity scraped by. The energy of the Earth would manifest itself in creatures called Syphons, and there were certain people in humanity who could filter those Syphons and create a viable power source, and that's how humanity kept going. And that was the setting, this weird post-apocalypse, Final Fantasy-esque game where players could filter these Syphons. Although it might have been that they could syphon the Filters, I don't remember at this point."

But with nothing but a title and a story concept to go off, there was a lot of work required to actually pin the title

STEALTH EDIT

HOW COINCIDENTAL SIMILARITIES LED TO CHANGES TO SYPHON FILTER

DESPITE HAVING NO way of knowing, a number of different aspects of *Syphon Filter* were so close to *Metal Gear Solid*'s that they were uncanny, forcing Eidetic to make changes where it could to pre-emptively stamp out any accusations – however unfair – of plagiarism.

THE NAME

Though the names themselves weren't similar, there was a familiarity to them. It was a "weird, funky name that makes no sense", explains Richard Ham, "and so was *Metal Gear*'s". Both had a relevance to the story – though *MGS* was stronger on that front – but Eidetic was too far along for a change by the time Konami announced the game.



THE ASIAN CO-STAR

The most peculiar coincidence is the chatty sidekick character that both studios had. Both would regularly interrupt gameplay to speak with the main character via an earpiece, but strangest of all is how *Syphon Filter*'s character was originally named Mei Xing, whereas Konami had named theirs Mei Ling. The final name used in Eidetic's game ended up as Lian Xing.



THE GATLING GUN

There's a boss fight halfway through *Syphon Filter* where Logan must dash between pillars to avoid being set alight by a flamethrower. It's one of the better boss fights in the game, which is lucky considering Girdeux – the character you encounter at this point – was originally equipped with a Gatling gun and played out in a fashion *very* similar to Vulcan Raven in *Metal Gear Solid*.



THE BUNKER MISSION

If *Syphon Filter* had opened with this mission then it would've been hard for anyone, having recently come off the back of *MGS* only a few months prior, to have not criticised Eidetic for copying. The feeling of the level – with the enemies draped in white and spotlights raising alarms should Logan get caught in them – is all too familiar to the opening mission of Shadow Moses.



THE BOSS FIGHT

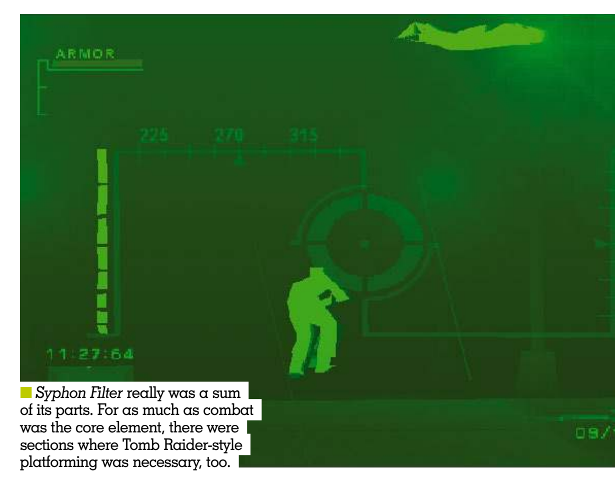
One aspect that simply couldn't be changed ahead of launch was the helicopter boss battle atop a snow-covered rooftop. The fly-by shootings of the chopper and even the overall visual appearance make it impossible to ignore comparisons. But Eidetic had already re-programmed one boss battle. It just had no more time to do the same for this one – it wasn't as simple as swapping out one weapon for another this time…



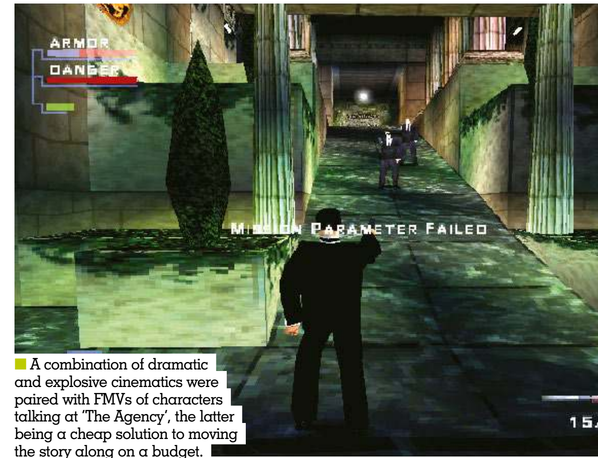
down to a videogame. It took Ham and the team discussing the project with a new producer at Sony, who brought to the table a love of anime – in particular a popular assassin-themed manga series known as Golgo 13, which would shift the gameplay towards playing as a hitman. "It still had that title [of *Syphon Filter*]," adds Ham, "but it didn't really mean anything any more. That was just something that the accounting department at Sony had called it and so the name had to stick, and so they came to us with the idea and we said we could work with that."

From this point on, *Syphon Filter* would come to be a merging point for a considerable number of personal interests for the direction of the project. From Ham's side, he had been inspired by the Wachowski's film *Assassins* with Antonio Banderas, and pushed hard for a change to the modern setting as a result. "There was a lot of pushback for that," he adds, "and ultimately Sony said, 'Okay, okay, we'll give you the modern day, but we can't possibly let the player be a full-on assassin in our game, players won't accept that, players won't want to be evil – they'll want to be good.' Now, this was back in the mid-Nineties of course. It is unthinkable now, in our post-Grand Theft Auto world, that there was a time when Sony thought no one would ever want to play as a bad guy."

But then there was art director John Garvin's obsession with *The X-Files*, which ultimately led to the silliness of the concept being pushed out in favour of a more serious, shadowy, conspiracy-theorist style story. The final suggestion came from Connie Booth, a name that Sony fans ought to already know. The executive



Syphon Filter really was a sum of its parts. For as much as combat was the core element, there were sections where Tomb Raider-style platforming was necessary, too.



A combination of dramatic and explosive cinematics were paired with FMVs of characters talking at 'The Agency', the latter being a cheap solution to moving the story along on a budget.

The taser didn't have too significant a role in the game, but it still managed to capture gamers' attention as they found great humour in electrifying an enemy to the point that they set alight.



It's easy to say that while [Syphon Filter] borrows aspects from other games, it comes nowhere near close to feeling like any of them. It's a game in its own right, straight and simple

IGN, 1999

producer of product development once had a keen interest in a career in the CIA, Ham tells us, and this passion ultimately led to her suggestion to move the game away from playing as a hitman and more towards a spy versus spy setting. It was here that these interests converged and *Syphon Filter* really began to take shape.

And yet it wasn't only the story that was drawn from a hodgepodge of inspirations. The gameplay, too, was born from a love of so many other elements that came before it, both from videogames and film. "From a gameplay point of view, Tomb Raider and *GoldenEye* were my two big influences," explains Ham, "I love the modern day setting, and I love that *GoldenEye* had this list of objectives and it wasn't just, 'Hey, collect the three coloured keys to open the doors,' and instead there were story objectives that you had to do. That was brilliant. And I loved the third-person aiming combat system of Tomb Raider."

But that wasn't all, Ham's biggest driving force behind *Syphon Filter* didn't even come from videogames at all, but the classic gun-fu cinema of the likes of John Woo and Chow Yun Fat. "I wanted to create that kind of experience on a console, because that wasn't something that – at the time – anyone had ever experienced. I really tried to push that right from the get-go." This, in turn, came from a recognition of the frantic combat of not only Quake – which was *the* shooter to beat at the time – but of that game's heritage in Doom and Wolfenstein. Ham explains that while he adored Quake's 3D mouselook gameplay, he lamented the loss of going up against seemingly impossible odds. "I really missed that sense of panic in Doom when you open the door and there's like 20 Cacodemons in there, so the other thing that I was really, really keen on was putting the player under pressure, to really make it feel like they were going up against an army. Which at the time in 3D – especially on the PlayStation – was just not a viable thing to do."

KONAMI PUSHED US SO HARD WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING WE EXISTED, WE WERE JUST THIS PLUCKY GROUP OF A DOZEN OR SO DEVELOPERS IN OREGON

This was, in fact, one of the major constraints for Eidetic during the game's development, as it was with so many developers dealing with full 3D gaming on the PlayStation for the first time. There was just not enough computing power to allow for the hopes and dreams of designers, and Ham was one such designer trapped

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Syphon Filter > Syphon Filter: Omega Strain > Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow



Designed as multiplayer, but made single player late in development, the first PS2 Syphon Filter game did not turn out well.



The later Syphon Filter games, eclipsed by the likes of Splinter Cell, struggled. They fared much better, however, on PSP.





WHAT THEY SAID...

The execution could have been better accomplished, Eidetic [introduced] a few ideas of its own, and these go a long way towards providing the game with its own identity

Edge, 1999

between his grand ideas and the actual capabilities of Sony's first console. The team had learnt from *Bubsy 3D*, at least, in that there was no shame in reducing the game's resolution down from high definition to help them achieve better visuals, but this didn't help much with the hardware restrictions. Memory, in particular, was a constant problem, and this meant implementing clever ways to allow for the scope of the project to retain its core while still working within technical limitations.

Of primary concern for Ham was the constraint on the number of enemies that could be on-screen at any one time, a number that he was never fully satisfied with due to his hopes of creating a constant threat of attack from enemies. "We didn't really pull that off," he admits, "because in the original *Syphon Filter*, at no time is there ever more than five guys attacking you. But, I still worked to make sure that you constantly felt under threat, so a big part of the design was how to respawn guys in a way that felt natural, they weren't warping in or coming in through dimensional jumpgates or something like that because it was a modern world, we couldn't do that, but I didn't want them to just appear. And you know what, if you play the original *Syphon Filter*, you'll notice that you're always getting attacked from behind. It was awesome that they attacked from behind because it wouldn't have occurred to the player to target lock on them and so the camera would instantly zip around and then you've got a full-view picture of your guy shooting over the shoulder as he runs away from guys, and you can get these really cool cinematic moments that fundamentally did not exist at the time in videogames."

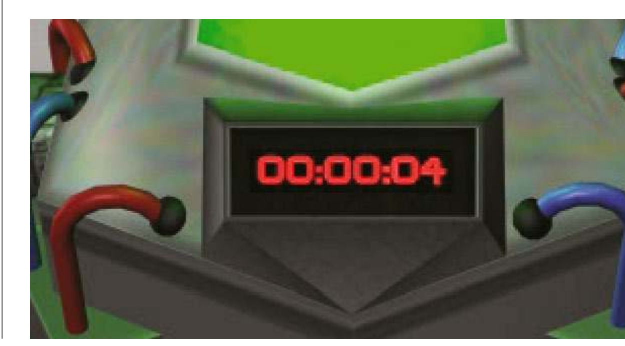
But this sense of cinematic gunplay wasn't the only aspect to the game that players will remember, it was equally as popular for its stealth gameplay – a facet of design that was not nearly as prevalent in gaming as it is now. This wasn't a need to compete with the likes of *Metal Gear Solid* – which would indirectly have a massive impact on the game in other ways – but instead a desire to expand on the small segments of stealth that were glimpsed in *GoldenEye*.

"The only reason we had stealth in our gameplay wasn't because, 'Yeah, I'm gonna reinvent how stealth works!' because stealth didn't really work at the time," recalls Ham. "The reason we had those stealth elements goes back to *GoldenEye*. I still remember to this day, in the very first level, where it's on the dam at the beginning of the movie and you have to infiltrate the place, you fight some guys, you find yourself in a heating duct and you go along and look down, and you shoot an unaware guard… that was a really revelatory moment in videogames. I think it was just about the only time there was any significant stealth in *GoldenEye* at all, but I thought that was such a cool moment that we should make a whole level like that. And then, 'Let's make another level like that!' and so on."

Despite the fact that stealth was not such an important aspect of the game, there was an obvious association that could be drawn between *Metal Gear Solid* and *Syphon Filter*, and despite the two only releasing a handful of months apart, the announcement of Kojima's landmark title gave birth to a growing fear in the team that the former was ready to decimate the latter. "I still remember the first time I saw *MGS* at E3 on the jumbotron," says Ham, "and we were all just in the crowd, staring up at this. Somehow the gods – the 3D, real-world, action adventure gods – had decided to step down to Earth and show us, 'This is how you do it.' And we were like, 'Oh my god, we're gonna die! This is going to be *Bubsy 3D* all over again! We got destroyed



There was enough variety to the pace of the game that each level felt distinct. The option to play most stages stealthily or gung ho was not common in game design at this point.







GETTING EXTREME

Richard Ham explains why he hid a harder difficulty mode in the game…

"NOT A LOT of people know this, but *Syphon Filter* has an extreme difficulty mode, and you don't know it. But there is a code that you put in the title screen and you'll put it into extreme mode or whatever, and then, when you're playing at that level, then you have to play it in the way that I wanted players to play – where you had to be really nimble. The reason we had to hide it in a code, though, was because if we actually made it an option on the title screen, the quality assurance team would have to test that mode and make sure there were no bugs. And there was no time to take that testing burden on, so I said, 'Okay, what if we just hide the mode and don't tell anybody about it.'"

by *Mario 64*, now we're going to get destroyed by *Metal Gear*.' And those last few months, they were a death march. Because as more and more information came out about *Metal Gear*, it was stunning to us."

This was in large part because of the uncanny resemblances, from the similarities of their unusual names that explained very little of the product to various aspects of both games that were, frankly, too close for comfort. "We had a plucky, female Asian sidekick that talks to you on the radio all the time. *They* had one! We had a big boss fight with a gigantic big guy with a Gatling gun who you chase. *They* had a boss fight like that!" The similarities were numerous, and yet all Eidetic could do was make a handful of changes where it was possible to, and just hope that *Syphon Filter* could stand on its own, away from these glaring similarities.

With only a handful of months left in development, there wasn't much more that could be done about it, the saving grace being that at least *Syphon Filter* favoured gun action over stealth – basically the opposite of *Metal Gear Solid*. It drove everyone on the team to do what they could to make their game be the best it could be, even if they each felt they were working towards inevitable destruction. "[Konami] pushed us so hard without even knowing we existed, because we were just this plucky, little group of a dozen or so developers in Oregon, and they were just this monolithic, mega-developer – they had like 50 or 60 people!"

But what stood out the most about Eidetic's game was not its similarities with any other game – or its inspirations – but instead its smooth amalgamation of existing concepts. The team brought together so many ideas that the sum of its parts felt completely new. *Syphon Filter* even skipped the traditional must-hit holiday season before Christmas and still managed to become a huge success for Sony and the PS1. "*Metal Gear Solid* launched in time for Christmas 1998, we launched in February of the following year," says Ham. "We were going to bed that night knowing that the reviews that were gonna come out were just gonna completely destroy us, and they didn't. They said, 'This is something really cool, this is a fusion of all these cool things. You might think it's a *Metal Gear* clone but it's not! It's stands on its own.' And that was absolutely amazing. All that hard work actually paid off." Eidetic had assumed it would be history repeating itself, that the ghost of *Bubsy 3D* was to curse them forever, to always find themselves one step behind others. But in fact quite the opposite happened, and the team was rewarded.

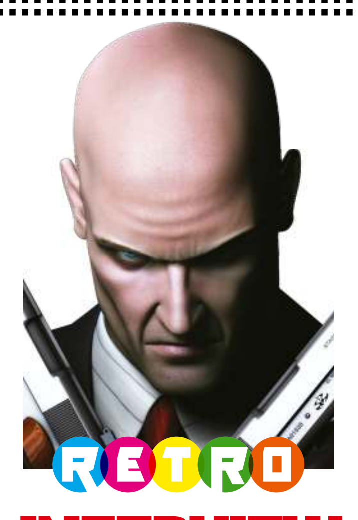


THIS IS GOING TO BE BUBSY 3D ALL OVER AGAIN! WE GOT DESTROYED BY MARIO 64, NOW WE'RE GOING TO GET DESTROYED BY METAL GEAR

Eidetic lives on today, with many of the original creators of *Syphon Filter* still working at the same company, now under the name of Sony Bend and working on *Days Gone*. It's incredible to think of the upcoming zombie survival shooter, and consider that if not for *Syphon Filter* and the "constant panic of development" – as Ham puts it – the developer perhaps wouldn't be here now, especially after its misstep with *Bubsy 3D*. And while the franchise of Syphon Filter may not have stood the test of time, the heroic determination that went into the creation of the original has, at least, helped the spirit of Eidetic to live on.







INTERVIEW
JESPER KYD

We catch up with the legendary game composer to find out how he started out in the demo scene and made his name on some of the biggest franchises in gaming today

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Hitman: Codename 47 [2000]
Composer



Freedom Fighters [2003]
Composer, music producer



Assassin's Creed [2007]
Composer

COULD YOU TALK a little about how your love of music coalesced around playing instruments and experimenting with home computers?
My brother and I got our first computer when I was about 13 and prior to that I had been playing away on pianos. Different places that I would go with my family, there was always a piano. My uncles and aunts all have pianos and I have quite a big family, so I've always been playing, in a way. When I got the Commodore 64 I was able to put structure into the music and actually create songs. That was a super-exciting moment for me. At the same time I was also very inspired by all of the music that was created on the Commodore 64 with that analogue SID chip in there. I thought it was just the most amazing thing, and I especially liked how creative the composers were on that platform.

So, that's how my whole interest got started and that's how I got introduced to videogames as well and started playing them. It happened simultaneously and there was definitely some kind of process of things evolving at the same time, trying to figure out how games were made. My friends were graphic artists and programmers, so we started a game company a few years later. As we were trying to figure out how to make games, I was trying to figure out how to make music. Games and music happened at the same time for me.

EVERY TIME I WOULD PRACTICE ON PIANO I HAD NO INTEREST IN LEARNING HOW TO PERFORM TRACKS

Is that part of why so much of your music merges live instruments with electronic music?
Yes, I was very much into the electronic-music world until *Hitman 2*. That was really a turning point for me. Up until that point I would say that most of my music had been electronic. I did practice on real instruments and played the guitar and piano for years, but the first music I composed I was very much into the electronic sounds and I just loved how electronic the Commodore 64 music was. I don't think that you can get any more electronic than that kind of sound. That's what I came out of and I don't want to say it was a foundation per se, but it was definitely one of the building blocks.

Did you have any formal training in music?
Not really, no. I took classical composition and I practiced that on piano. I had a really good teacher. I also practiced classical guitar for about five years and figured out that that wasn't really me. Every time I would practice on piano I had no interest in learning how to perform tracks, even though my piano teacher



LOOKING AHEAD

"Well, *State of Decay 2*, I'm not sure I can talk too much about it, but first of all I wrote over three hours of music for it, so I really got immersed in that world over the last two years I've been working on that project. It's a more melodic score.

It feels like it's the third State of Decay soundtrack I've written because I wrote the first *State of Decay* and then they did a HD version for Xbox One and that one had a full soundtrack as well and a separate soundtrack release.

It takes place out there in rural America, so that's the sound that continues, with these broken guitars and a sense of fitting with the landscape that you're playing in. You certainly have to connect with that. Outside of all of these solo instruments and lots of acoustic percussion and things we've recorded there's the sound for the zombie apocalypse, which is more the zombie-driven sound that has a lot of tensions and pulses and modular synthesisers and all kinds of things that are there to give you that sense of tension and danger. Those two worlds are mixed together."

WIN! JESPER KYD ALBUMS

Thanks to Sumthing Else Music Works we have a selection of Jesper Kyd soundtracks on vinyl and some signed CDs to give away to one lucky reader. All you have to do to win is answer the following simple question:

WHAT WAS THE NAME OF KYD'S FIRST GAME, USS JOHN YOUNG, IN THE US?

A. Battle Stations
B. Oh Captain, My Captain
C. Ship It!

Send your answer to gamestm@futurenet.com with the subject line "Kyd Comp". We will accept entries up to 18 April 2018, after which point we will draw a winner at random. See **gamestm.co.uk/competitions-terms-and-conditions** for terms and conditions.

was always on about 'We have to work on your form'. It was always more the composition part that interested me. How are tracks put together? When you put two different chords together how do you get a different emotion? That really interested me.

When did you begin to realise there was a career path ahead of you from all of this?

It was very organic. As I mentioned when I was 13 I got a Commodore 64 and a few months later I started fiddling with a music program my Dad had bought, just trying to see what it was about. Then I was introduced to the demo scene. That's when I was introduced to all of these demos and underground programs that only existed in the scene; they were not retail, you couldn't buy them in a store. I started working on some of those music programs, which I thought were a lot better sounding. They could really create some fantastic sounds. So, that's how that whole thing got kicked off.

The second half to that is that once I got introduced to the demo scene I wanted to start creating demos too with my childhood friend Michael (he was the graphics guy, I was the music guy), and we also made music together, actually. We wanted to do these presentations and demos as well and as that thing grew and we got better I was in different demo groups and got introduced to more and more people. At some point we felt we had some really great talent in that group and that's when we started our first games company, which was Zyrinx, which later evolved into IO interactive.

What was your first released product and how involved were you in the process of making it?

My first released product was with a company called Magic Bytes and it was called *USS John Young*. It was an Amiga game and it came out in, I think, 1990. I just did the main title music for that. My first real soundtrack where I had a full 20 to 30 tracks and I felt like I got to go from A to C was *Sub-Terrania* for the Sega Mega Drive. We had made our own music program for that that could do pure FM sound. We were able to deliver that at 44Hz, 16-bit quality when a lot of games in that format had some really crappy 8-bit samples. So that was fun to be able to create my own instruments and that was a nice transfer from the demo scene and then into that because it was the same spirit that we kept going.

What do you consider to be the first game you were really able to put your stamp on?

That's an interesting question. I think it would be *MDK 2* and *Hitman*. They came out around the same time. Prior to that I had done two games called *Amok* and *Scorcher* and I certainly had a lot of fun with those as well. That was what in those days I called CD-based music, meaning it wasn't chip music. It was music made with real instruments. But I felt that *Hitman* and *MDK 2* had more of a cinematic sense than those two earlier games.

Those games were at the beginning of the current era of games with more attention and higher budgets for graphics and sound.





■ Kyd's work on *Hitman* was actually born of a long working relationship with members of IO Interactive who had also been at Zyrinx together with Kyd and remained in Denmark when he moved to New York. It was a partnership that would produce four Hitman titles between 2000 and 2006.



■ Like many game developers out of the Eighties, Jesper Kyd actually found his feet in the home-computer demo scene, experimenting with music for Commodore 64 before making his first piece of music for the opening titles of *USS John Young* in 1990.



Yeah, I totally agree and I think the Sega CD had a lot to do with that. Suddenly you would have a Sega Mega Drive game and it would have a CD in there just streaming the music off the CD. Suddenly there were guitars and real synthesisers and the quality of the music went from one place to a whole other place.

How did you actually get connected with *Hitman*?

The founders of IO. I was in their game company prior to them founding the company, so we had worked on *Sub-Terrania*, *Amok*, *Scorcher*, *Red Zone*. I had done a bunch and even before all of those games we were working on demos and a few games that never made it to release. So, I felt we had been working together for quite a while and they knew me well. We grew up together and they know what I'm about. There's a certain amount of trust there. They know I'm always there to push myself to do the absolute best that I can and try to come up with something really unique. That was what they were looking for.

ASSASSIN'S CREED WAS DEFINITELY THE MOST CHALLENGING GAME I WORKED ON

Were you able to be involved in the game's development from an early stage?

Yeah, I was quite involved, but I would say I got more involved with the second, third and fourth Hitman. That's something that over the years we get… I was going to say we got better at working together, but that's not quite accurate. We got more and more experience working together. That's how to put it. And in getting more experience working together you get a sense of how the whole thing works and you're able to trust each other more and work faster and that kind of thing.

Do you find the time to experiment a little between projects?

Yes, a lot actually. I usually experiment during the project as well. And that's really something that I add to a project. When I'm working on a project, of course if it's super-tight deadline-wise and you have four weeks, then you have to kind of sit down and say 'We can't take a week off right now and experiment'. I often get involved early and that means there's time to experiment. I can give an example; I was working on a project and I was doing a revision on a track and it was starting to feel like I'd done a lot of revisions because we're trying to get it perfect and things are changing so I'm changing with it and one night I was like, 'Okay, I'm just going to stop and do something completely different, because I need this'. I did a 17-minute theme and I sent it to them and said 'this doesn't fit at all, but I just needed to do this because I needed to get it out'. And they were so happy because they loved that track and it didn't fit what we were trying to do at that point, but we found another place to put it.

***Assassin's Creed II* stands out as an interesting challenge with its mix of renaissance and near-future settings. What was that like to work on?**

Following *Assassin's Creed 1*, I thought that was a fantastic game, so from the moment I got involved I was super excited. This was just something I hadn't seen before and as a gamer I thought it was totally amazing. But when *Assassin's Creed II* started the thing about that was I was really surprised how much focus there was on things that usually aren't focused on in the games industry. Things such as romantic lighting and romantic moods. The early tests of the game I thought were all very moody and romantic and I just knew right away that this would need to have a really atmospheric score. That really blew my mind. And yeah, it was a challenging project because there were so many different types of stories and styles, but that's something that we had already touched upon in *Assassin's Creed 1*. *Assassin's Creed* was definitely the most challenging game I worked on. We had to figure out what was the sound of the Animus and the Brotherhood and how the Animus filters and warps the music a bit. It was more about the music and the mood this time around. We had a lot of the functionality is what I mean to say. We had figured out a lot of that stuff already. In that aspect it was a really enjoyable score and I could feel that the team, they knew they were part of something that was very exciting. It was super fun to be involved with.

Do you feel that you have a preference between working with a full orchestra or working digitally?

I always let the project dictate where I'm going. If you're working on a game like *Vermintide II*, you're not going for an orchestral sound. You're going for more of a middle-ages, crazy industrial sound that could potentially be played by the Skaven rats themselves in some band they might have. Trying to add some kind of realism to the Warhammer universe, that's the perspective. I don't miss not working with an orchestra on a score like that. We work with a lot of solo performers on that, so the whole score is basically live, but you won't find a cello… well you will perhaps find a broken cello, but you won't find a string section in there.

But if you're asking me to write an orchestral soundtrack, then I very much love working with a live orchestra. It needs to be a live orchestra.

Originally planned as a GameCube launch title, Eternal Darkness was delayed at the last minute after Silicon Knights sought to change the visual design of a key location following the 11 September terror attacks

GAME CHANGERS

ETERNAL DARKNESS: SANITY'S REQUIEM

Developer: Silicon Knights **Publisher:** Nintendo
Released: 23 June 2002 **System:** Gamecube

It helped usher in an age of mature gaming on Nintendo's GameCube and delivered one of the best twists on survival horror. Join us to celebrate Silicon Knight's crowning achievement

WHAT WOULD IT mean to see beyond the veil of our reality? To cut through shadows and peer into the souls of those that dwell in the darkness, just beyond reach; the maleficent feeding on the fragility of human nature at the behest of an arcane force? It's a tantalising question, one that cult-classic *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* presents to you in its opening hours. The journey that follows is an unrelenting one as you are challenged to sacrifice your own sanity in search of an answer to what these dark forces really want.

Eternal Darkness carved out its own space in the history of interactive entertainment when it launched exclusively for GameCube in 2002, the result of an unlikely partnership between Nintendo and Silicon Knights. It's impressive, particularly when you consider that it was once in development for the Nintendo 64. It looked, for the time at least, as if it were little more than Western-developed homage to Resident Evil – pitting an isolated protagonist against a derelict mansion, a claustrophobic building with bloody history soaked into its foundation and a supernatural force haunting its spacious hallways. Thankfully, there was more to *Eternal Darkness* than mere homage alone, transcending the survival horror moniker to become more akin to a psychological thriller, eschewing Capcom's

WHERE ETERNAL DARKNESS TRULY SUCCEEDS IS IN LEVERAGING YOUR SANITY AS A COMMODITY

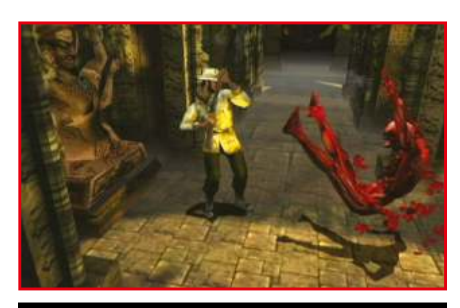
BEST SANITY EFFECTS

I OUR FAVOURITE WAYS ETERNAL DARKNESS TWISTS ITS GAMEPLAY



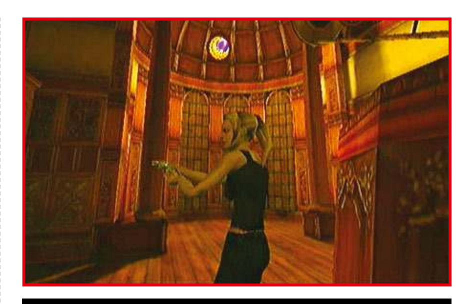
CORRUPTED DATA

★ In certain scenarios during *Eternal Darkness*, if your Sanity meter is low as you enter the room attempting to save will instead prompt the game to announce that it is deleting all of your data. It might not sound like much, but at the time it is sickeningly scary.



STALKING STATUES!

★ The family mansion has very spacious corridors, perfect for helping to build a sense of scale in *Eternal Darkness*' opening hours. In the later moments of the game, however, you'll begin to find statues and busts beginning to follow Alex around. It's incredibly unsettling.



UPSIDE DOWN

★ There's little more disorientating than walking into a room only to discover that the environment has been turned upside down, tilting ever so slightly as you attempt to navigate it. Of all the Sanity effects in the game, the ones that play with screen position are perhaps the most terrifying.

B-movie plotting in favour or something far more complex and gripping in its execution.

Student Alexandra Roivas is on the scene to investigate the gruesome murder of her grandfather, becoming embroiled in a struggle against a powerful, otherworldly entity whose fate is tied to an ancient text. Through the Tome of Eternal Darkness you pursue a force that transcends time – unravelling this tale across 2,000 years of scattered history, inhabiting the bodies of 12 playable characters to uncover how their paths are intertwined with your own. It's a clever storytelling mechanic, whisking the player to four different locations throughout the ages – the decay of time as clear to see in each as the horrors that haunt them.

It's here where Silicon Knights seems to effortlessly build atmosphere, creating an experience that's as starkly individual as it is unendingly unnerving. It uses each of its locations and characters – many of which are ordinary folk caught up in something far greater than they are capable of comprehending – to create an impressive scope to the adventure, selling the concept of a horror meandering across time and reality better than most in the industry could hope to achieve.

While much of the moment-to-moment action can revolve around fairly rote combat – pushing you to haphazardly hack and slash your way through a chorus of the undead – *Eternal Darkness* more than makes up for its simplistic mechanics in other areas. In fact, problem solving is a huge part of the game's structure and handled intuitively throughout, which is surprising given how so many games of this ilk fall into the trap of near-nonsensical puzzle design. Instead, its puzzles combine excellently with the oppressive atmosphere that pervades over the entire experience, pushing you to constantly question your inaction and the decisions made along the way. A complex and efficient magic system, built on a foundation of colour-coded runes and scrolls, promotes experimentation whilst still feeding into the completion of various challenges and overcoming the game's toughest encounters. Approaching both problem solving and the use of magic requires a degree of lateral thinking that isn't usually seen in these types of videogames; it was a breath of fresh air in 2002, and it's still surprising to see all these years later.

Where *Eternal Darkness* truly succeeds, however, is in leveraging your sanity as a commodity – one to be spent by an unyielding force working to quell your investigation by any means necessary. The fragility of the human mind and its perception of reality is laid bare as you begin to push through the chaos. Sanity is in short supply – a resource like any other for the characters of this story – plummeting as you encounter enemies, and only slightly restored after you overcome one in a moment of frenzied action.

It's here where Silicon Knights established *Eternal Darkness* as a legend. The game constantly feels as if it is conspiring against you, reflecting the mindset of the characters as each teeters on the brink of insanity out across the game world. The camera shifts around you, tilting at obscure angles to throw off your perception; screams echo loudly through empty corridors and whispers wilt your confidence away in vacant rooms, bleeding walls and hallucinations born from the character's psyche help to establish a tone of near constant unease. Sanity affects so much of the experience, eagerly taunting you as more and more of it is stripped away as you push further through the tales found in the Tome of Eternal Darkness. The tease of corrupted save data, disconnected controllers during inopportune moments of frenzied violence, or your TV shuttering off entirely, *Eternal Darkness* took pride in shattering the fourth wall to challenge your psyche.

Eternal Darkness failed commercially, shifting less than half a million copies worldwide, but it immediately became a critical darling. Its clunky combat and combative controls often forgotten due to the strength of its atmosphere, its unique structure, and playfully obtuse approach to shock and awe. *Eternal Darkness* never let you rest, nor did it let you settle into a comfortable rhythm – Silicon Knights never succumbed to the desire to hand the player the tools to survive without fear of reprisal. This game is an amazing achievement, one that had a huge impact on the survival horror genre, even if its best aspects accomplishments have never been successfully recreated.

KEY FACTS

- *Eternal Darkness* was the first game published by Nintendo, as opposed to a third-party developer, to be rated 'M' for Mature by the ESRB. A sequel was planned, reportedly to be launched alongside the Wii U, but was cancelled due to Silicon Knight's legal entanglement with Epic Games.

- Are you wondering why you haven't seen the Sanity system make an appearance in more videogames? It turns out Nintendo actually patented it, restricting other companies from making use of the concept. So wide-reaching is this patent that very few developers have dared include anything even remotely similar to it.

GAME CHANGERS

TEN OF THE BEST PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR GAMES

MUST PLAY GAMES THAT'LL SCARE YOU SILLY



CALL OF CTHULHU: DARK CORNERS OF THE EARTH

Dark Corners Of The Earth was a revelation when it first launched for Xbox in 2005, utilising a smart, first-person design to evoke a near constant sense of dread throughout. With no discernible HUD to be found, the player condition is relayed entirely through sound cues and a Sanity meter. The character's escalating mental degradation manifests itself as graphical anomalies and the alteration of control sensitivity.



AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT

Amnesia earns its place in horror history by making players powerless to stop the encroaching darkness. With no obvious weaponry to be found, survival is made all the more difficult by requiring Sanity to be managed, forcing players to weigh up the risk/reward of embracing light and dark – punishing players who spend too long in the shadows by subjecting them to visual and audio hallucinations, drawing more attention to the threats that lurk throughout the haunted Prussian Brennenburg Castle.



FATAL FRAME

Set in an abandoned Japanese mansion, *Fatal Frame* is a terrifying videogame that casts you as both survivor and voyeur. As you look for answers as to the disappearance of a sibling, you quickly discover that the only way to protect yourself from the hostile inhabitants is to capture them on film with the Camera Obscura – an ancient camera that has the ability to capture the ghosts assaulting you throughout. Tense and sharp, *Fatal Frame* is one of the scariest games ever made.



I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM

A smart point-and-click adventure game that preys on humanity's capacity to do both good and evil, *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream* is a sci-fi themed psychological thriller that portrays five characters trapped in an unending nightmare simulation by a hostile AI. Each is asked to complete a crafted scenario designed to prey on their particular weaknesses in an effort to find redemption, with paranoia and insanity woven into the fabric of the core experience.



P.T.

Dead but certainly not forgotten, *P.T.* – a playable teaser for the cancelled *Silent Hills* – gave us but a glimpse into the future of the survival horror genre. It was a complex masterclass in both scenario and puzzle design from veteran creator Hideo Kojima and his team at Konami's Kojima Productions. An unsettling exploration of evoking terror in contained spaces; threatening and claustrophobic, cryptic and unforgettable, *P.T.* was a wonderful concept that was sadly cut down in its prime.



DEAD SPACE 2

Dead Space 2 walks a tight line between action and horror, but it does so in a way that never dilutes the psychological warfare that it wilfully inflicts upon its players. Visceral Games terrorised players with *Dead Space 2*, a startling masterpiece that feels as suffocating as it does invigorating. Be it because of the frantic combat mechanics, clever use of visual and audio identifiers, or its general atmosphere alone, Dead Space 2 will forever be a modern classic.



SILENT HILL 2

Look no further than *Silent Hill 2* for incredible atmospheric horror. This seminal PS2 release unfurls protagonist James Sunderland's twisted psyche all around you, with the town of Silent Hill feeding on his fractured thoughts and delivering nightmare after nightmare in response. It's an incredible videogame with excellent writing, chilling scares and unrivalled direction. *Silent Hill 2* is a classic that set the template for horror games that don't rely on jump scares to succeed in scaring the hell out of you.



SIREN: BLOOD CURSE

Siren: Blood Curse is almost unbearable; a horrible cocktail of stress and anxiety stranding you within the hellscape that is Hanuda Village. Being chased down by a Shibito ghoul is one thing, having the agency to "sight jack" it as it stalks you is another entirely. Using this innovative system, you are able to see from the perspective of your pursuer giving you a sense of just how close you are to a terrifying death, while ensuring there is very little you can do about it.



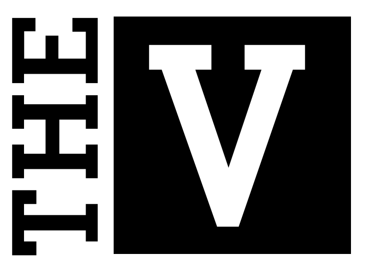
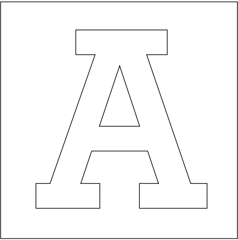
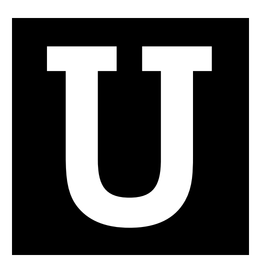
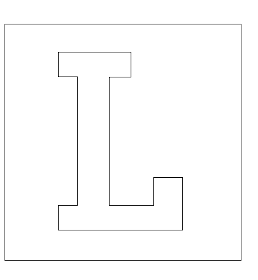
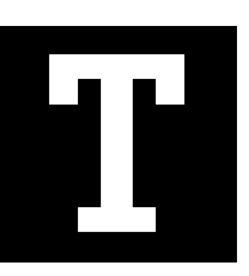
THE EVIL WITHIN

With Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami at the helm we had always expected great things from *The Evil Within*. What we didn't expect to find was an action-horror game that so delicately destroyed the psyche, with Tango Gameworks using surmounting tension and extreme scenes of psychological torture to really grind the player down into submission. It isn't a perfect game, but its cinematic visual style and solid pacing makes this a curious psychological horror for the modern gamer.



SANITARIUM

It might have aged a little poorly but there's still something unsettling about *Sanitarium* to this day. It's unsettling in a way that few games manage, a psychological horror game that doesn't shy away from exploring strange subjects or disturbing concepts with subtlety. Its scenarios are twisted, as are the characters you'll meet along the way. This is one point-and-click that never fails to surprise, and it's well worth your time should you have missed it the first time around.

The stick has a nice level of resistance to it and some very satisfying clicks as you move it around. It may not be snappy enough for pro fighters, but for some arcade authenticity it does the job nicely.

The build quality of this stick isn't necessarily at the highest end, but it's still pretty good. It has a great weight to it, and will sit nicely on your lap as you play your favourite fighter.

NES30 ARCADE STICK

MANUFACTURER: **8BITDO** PRICE: **£64.99**

While its colouring and styling make it look at if the N30 is a classic NES arcade stick brought back to life, in actuality the NES never had a stick this robust. The N30 has a gorgeous retro style to it, but that's all in service of linking it with the Nintendo Switch and the plethora of classic arcade titles that are currently available on the platform.

And it does the job very nicely indeed. The classic design is complemented by some classic feel. The stick clicks in a satisfying way, and has just the right amount of resistance to it to give your movement a really authentic arcade feel, while the buttons are all nicely sized and have a satisfying amount of depth to them. For fighters like Street Fighter it maybe doesn't have the crispness of movement control that hardcore players would be looking for, but it's a very capable device for this style of game all the same.

And with any other classic games, like all of the NeoGeo titles that are available on Switch these days, the stick works great too. Many of these games have been ported directly with some peculiar button mapping for the console, but on a stick like this everything feels far more natural and comfortable.

Pairing the device to the Switch is incredibly easy, and since it uses Bluetooth to connect it is also compatible with Android, Windows and Mac, making it a fantastic investment for gamers on those platforms. It may not be a hardcore stick exactly, but for bridging the gap between modern and retro gaming in an affordable way, we would definitely recommend you give 8Bitdo's latest a look.

VERDICT 8/10

GAMING CLOTHING



GOLF STORY – GALF SHIRT

Fans of *Golf Story* will recognise *Galf* as the 8-bit mini game of simulated golf inside the Switch RPG. Not only does it have simple top-down visuals, but it even has a classic 8-bit soundtrack and effects.
www.fangamer.com



DUCK HUNT

We do love a classic print design on a shirt, and this is a fine example of the form, with a simple black-and-white design, a little humour in the messages, and just enough weathering to add authenticity.
www.designbyhumans.com



WE WANT YOU!

Have you joined the *Splatoon 2* army yet? Have you picked your side in the monthly Splatfest? If you have then you'll want to have some more people join the fight, and this is the shirt you need to attract them.
www.qwertee.com

BAGS OF HOLDING



ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS BACKPACK

PRICE: **£41.99**

This is a pretty simple bag design, but we love the clean lines and bold gold foil logo. The detailing coming down the sides, and the buckles across the body of the bag are really nice touches as well.
WWW.EMP.CO.UK



THE DIVISION SHD BACKPACK

PRICE: **£40**

There are a couple of things we like about this; first the bold, simple colours; black with orange detailing is a strong combo. The toxic hazard symbol at the bottom is a nice touch. The standout nod to the game, though, is the comms circle on the strap.
INSERTCOINCLOTHING.COM



SPARTAN LOCKE BACKPACK

PRICE: **£62.99**

It's the details that make this a really fun bag once again, particularly the mix of materials. The textures really help to evoke Locke's armour in some nice ways. A UNSC ONI patch on the strap is an excellent addition too.
WWW.AMAZON.CO.UK



SUPER MARIO VILLAINS SUBLIMATED BACKPACK

PRICE: **£39.99**

The bold style of the art is what really jumps out. The bag design itself is very simple, allowing the art to do all the work, and the mix of colours and characters gives it a lot of impact.
WWW.GAME.CO.UK



NINTENDO NES CARTRIDGE BACKPACK

PRICE: **£29.12**

It's always a pleasure to see the iconic NES cartridge out in the wild. *Super Mario Bros* was packaged with so many consoles that it might just be the most recognisable game art around, and this bag's interpretation is excellent.
WWW.GAME.CO.UK



INNOVATOR BACKPACK

PRICE: **£34.99**

This is officially called a Stealth Digital Backpack, most likely thanks to its black colour scheme, although the nod to *Portal* in its logo is also pretty stealth. Chances are no one would notice with this subtle design.
WWW.GAMETEE.CO.UK



NUKA COLLEGE BACKPACK

PRICE: **£24.99**

Another Gametee product with a relatively subtle nod to its gaming passion, the bold red of this Nuka Cola bag is allowed to shine with the simple design of the bag itself. And the embroidered message is very nicely done indeed.
WWW.GAMETEE.CO.UK



ATARI BLACK KATAKANA BACKPACK

PRICE: **$39.99**

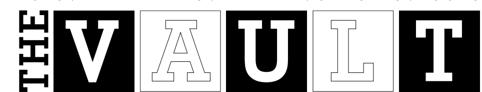
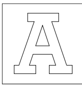
This is part of a series of Atari products ThinkGeek has up on its site right now, and this one might be our favourite. The writing on the front says Atari in Japanese, and it features a padded pocket inside for a laptop or tablet.
WWW.THINKGEEK.COM

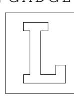
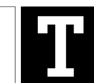


LOZ HYLIAN SHIELD BACKPACK

PRICE: **$14.99**

There are two very smart features to this backpack that we like. The first is a padded pocket on the inside for your laptop, which stops it from rolling around the relatively large bag. The second is the sleeve on the back face for a Master Sword to slide in.
WWW.THINKGEEK.COM

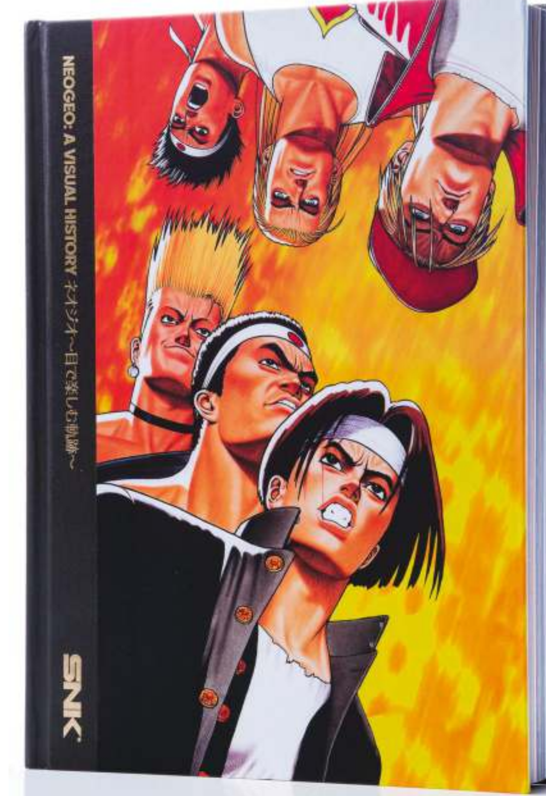





NEOGEO: A VISUAL HISTORY

PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**



The NeoGeo was the PS4 Pro or Xbox One X of its day, but even more so. It brought arcade-quality visuals and processing to your home in an age when everyone else was just trying to emulate them, and it came at a cost to match. It launched for $649 in the US in 1991, the equivalent of launching for around $1,100 today.

But NSK Corporation embraced that premium cost and quality in everything it did, and this visual history does much the same, lavishing every aspect of the console with space so that it can breath and be appreciated piece by piece. From gorgeous full-spread photography to page after page of pixel art, this book is every bit the visual story it promises on the cover. Some write-ups on the history of the console and company behind it help set the scene, but really it's all about appreciating the box art, the clean lines of the console and controllers, and the crisp design of every manual and pamphlet associated with the device.

If we were going to make a churlish complaint, it would be that the book is a little light on supporting history and interviews (save for a handful at the back of the book, but if you were looking for a wordy tome then why would you pick up a visual history in the first place?). As premium coffee-table books on a piece of gaming history go, this is one of the best, packed with great photography and art, and beautifully packaged too.

www.bitmapbooks.co.uk

VERDICT 9/10



DISHONORED: THE RETURN OF DAUD

Taking place during the events of *Dishonored II*, Daud is an assassin with the mark of the Outsider on his hand, seeking a weapon that can kill the devious entity that has marked him. But in a time of turmoil for Dunwall, he has a little more to deal with than he may have bargained for.

www.titanbooks.com



MASS EFFECT DISCOVERY

What is the Andromeda Initiative? Prior to the events of Bioware's last game, no one really knew, and the Turians were apparently suspicious of the project. This prequel to the Bioware game follows a Turian recruit looking to uncover the truth and extract a scientist in the process.

www.darkhorse.com



MINECRAFT MASTER BUILDER WORLD TOUR

This new guide book for *Minecraft* is focused on guides to making buildings in the game inspired by architecture from around the world. It includes bridge designs, monuments and even palaces that you can call your home. Expect some spectacular designs to be included with this one.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



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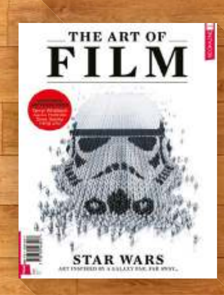




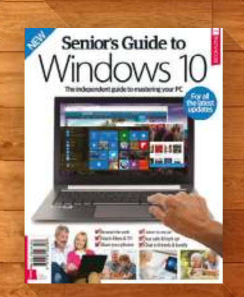












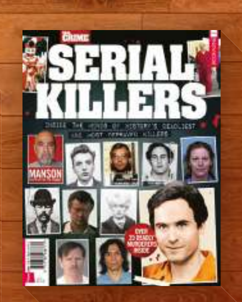


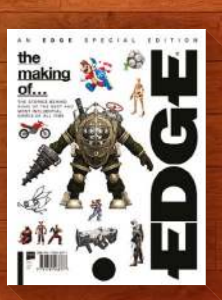
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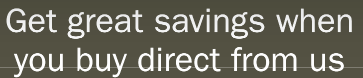












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